Weird Tales

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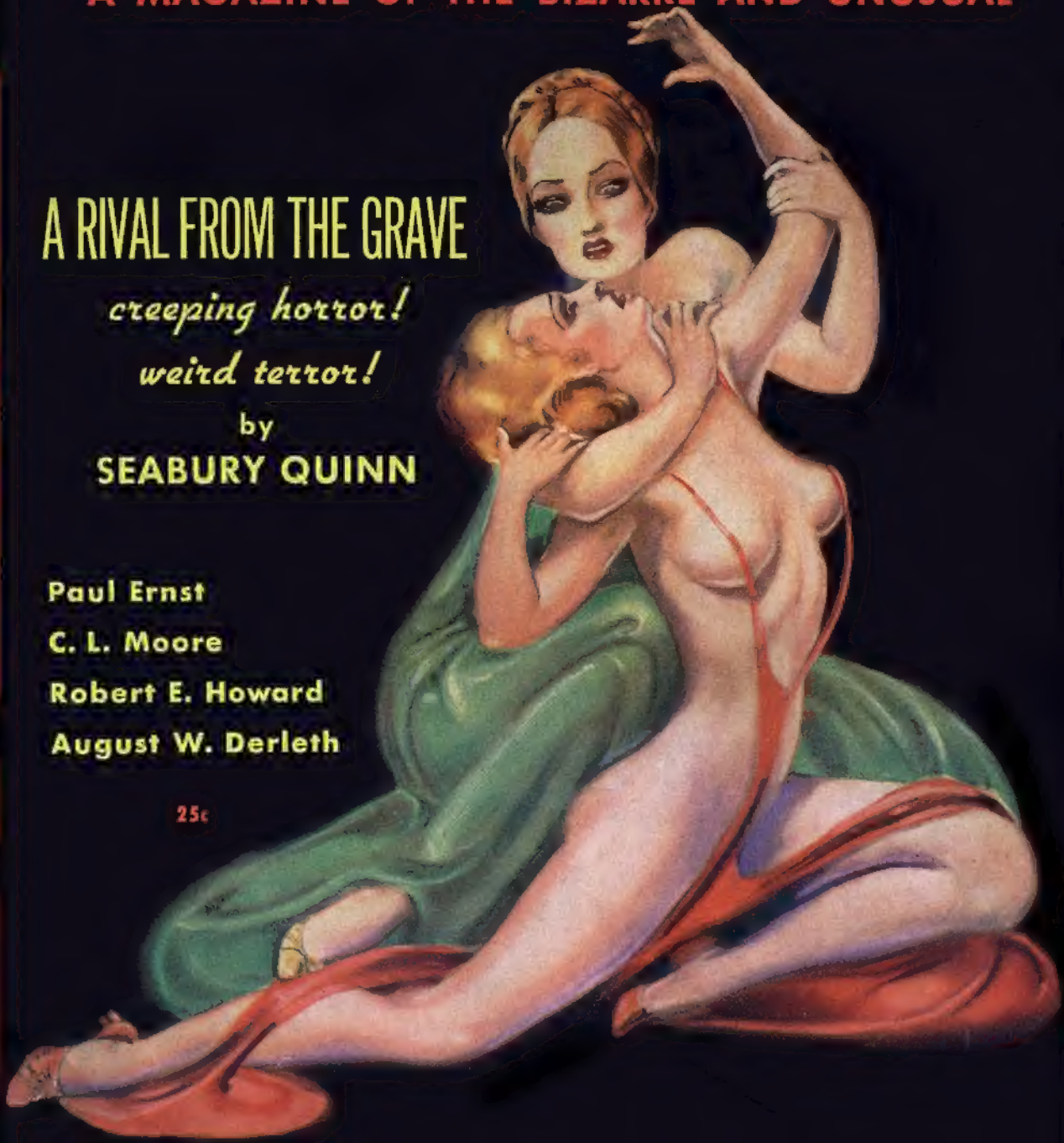
A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL



A RIVAL FROM THE GRAVE

creeping horror!
weird terror!

by
SEABURY QUINN

Paul Ernst
C. L. Moore
Robert E. Howard
August W. Derleth

25¢

JANUARY, 1936

WEIRD TALES

Printed in U.S.A.

Vol. 27, No. 1

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WITH Shakespeare's debut in Hollywood, an important Shakespeare revival has begun. Shakespeare used to be considered by the average person as something highbrow and therefore uninteresting; the dry-as-dust methods of teaching it in many of our schools have often succeeded in killing a love for Shakespeare at the outset of the student's acquaintance with him; and also the slovenly way it was treated on the stage, with one or two stars who made their words intelligible, and the other actors mouthing their words as if the Shakespeare idiom were another language altogether. Then, a few years ago, the Stratford-upon-Avon players came from England, and acted Shakespeare's plays as if they were written in their own everyday speech, so natural was their use of it. In 1933 and 1934 the Globe Theater players, from England, gave tabloid versions of Shakespeare's plays in the English Village at the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago, lasting a little less than an hour each, and made enthusiastic Shakespeare lovers out of thousands of people from all over the United States. Every performance was played to a packed theater, and there were six performances a day during the two summers of the Chicago fair. The Globe Theater players repeated their success at the world's fair in San Diego. A year ago Max Reinhart put on A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM as a spectacle on the stage; and since then he has made a feature-length movie of it in Hollywood, produced with all the lavishness of which Hollywood is capable.

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A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, $2.50; Canada, $2.75; elsewhere, $3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"I loathed myself for having let her make a slave of me."

A Rival From the Grave

By SEABURY QUINN

A tale of creeping horror that rises to a climax of sheer terror—a story of Jules de Grandin

"HOW many lobster sandwiches is that?" I demanded.

Jules de Grandin knit his brows in an effort at calculation. "Sixteen, no, eighteen, unless I have lost count," he answered.

"And how many glasses of champagne?"

"Only ten."

"By George, you're hopeless," I reproved. "You're an unconscionable glutton and wine-bibber."

"Eh bien, others who considered themselves as righteous as you once said the same of one more eminent than I," he assured with a grin as he stuffed the last remaining *canapé homard* into his mouth and washed it down with a gulp of Roederer. "Come, my friend, forget to take your pleasures sadly for a while. Is it not a wedding feast?"

"It is," I conceded, "but——"

"And am I not on fire with curiosity?" he broke in. "Is it a custom of America to hold the celebration in the bridegroom's home?"

"No, it's decidedly unusual, but in this case the bride had only a tiny apartment and the groom this big house, so——"

"One understands," he nodded, finding resting-space for his sandwich plate and glass, "and a most impressive house it is. Shall we seek a place to smoke?"

We jostled through the throng of merrymakers, passed along the softly carpeted hall and made our way to Frazier Taviton's study. Book-cases lined the walls, a pair of Lawson sofas ranged each side the fireplace invited us to rest, a humidor of Gener cigars, silver caddies of Virginia, Russian and Egyptian cigarettes and an array of cloisonné ash-trays offered us the opportunity to indulge our craving for tobacco.

"Exquise, superbe, parfait!" the little Frenchman commented as he ignored our host's expensive cigarettes and selected a vile-smelling Maryland from his case; "this room was made expressly to offer us asylum from those noisy ones out there. I think—*que diable!* Who is that?" He nodded toward the life-size portrait in its golded frame which hung above the mantel-shelf.

"H'm," I commented, glancing up. "Queer Frazier left *that* hanging. I suppose he'll be taking it down, though——"

"Ten thousand pestilential mosquitoes, do not sit there muttering like an elderly spinster with the vapors!" he commanded. "Tell me who she is, my friend."

"It's Elaine. She is—she *was,* rather—the first Mrs. Taviton. Lovely, isn't she?"

"U'm?" he murmured, rising and studying the picture with what I thought unnecessary care. *"Non,* my friend, she is not lovely. Beautiful? But yes, assuredly. Lovely? No, not at all."

The artist had done justice to Elaine Taviton. From the canvas she looked forth exactly as I'd seen her scores of times. Her heavy hair, red as molten copper, with vital, flame-like lights in it, was drawn back from her forehead and parted in the center, and a thick, three-stranded plait was looped across her brow in a kind of Grecian coronal. Her complexion had that strange transparency one sometimes but not often finds in red-haired women. A tremulous green light played in her narrow eyes, and her slim, bright-red lips were slightly parted in a faintly mocking smile to show small, opalescent teeth. It was, as Jules de Grandin had declared, a fascinating face, beautiful but unlovely, for in those small

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● Jules de Grandin is without doubt the most lovable and fascinating detective in fiction. Occultist, scientist and ghost-breaker, he is not a detective in the ordinary sense, for he uses his keen mind and quick wit against supernatural wrong-doing as well as against crimes attributable to natural agencies. Vain, boastful, mercurial, a dreaded foe and a loyal friend, de Grandin has been the hero of more than fifty stories in WEIRD TALES, and his popularity with the readers is increasing with each new tale. We recommend to you this story of his latest exploit: "A Rival from the Grave."

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features, cut with lapidarian regularity, there was half concealed, but just as certainly revealed, the frighteningly fierce fire of an almost inhuman sensuality. The sea-green gown she wore was low-cut to the point of daring, and revealed an expanse of lucent shoulders, throat and bosom with the frankness characterizing the portraiture of the Restoration. Scarcely whiter or more gleaming than the skin they graced, a heavy string of perfectly matched pearls lay round her throat, while emerald ear-studs worth at least a grand duke's ransom caught up and accentuated the virid luster of her jade-toned eyes.

"*Morbleu*, she is Circe, la Pompadour and Helen of Tyre, all in one," de Grandin murmured. "Many men, I make no doubt, have told her, 'I worship you,' and many others whispered they adored her, but I do not think that any ever truthfully said, 'I love you.' "

He was silent a moment, then: "They were divorced?"

"No, she died a year or so ago," I answered. "It happened in New York, so I only know the gossip of it, but I understand that she committed suicide——"

"One can well believe it," he responded as I paused, somewhat ashamed of myself for retailing rumor. "She was vivid, that one, cold as ice toward others, hot as flame where her desires were concerned. Self-inflicted death would doubtless have seemed preferable to enduring thwarted longing. Yes."

A CHORUS of shrill squeals of feminine delight, mingled with the heavier undertone of masculine voices, drew our attention to the hall. As we hurried from the study we saw Agnes Taviton upon the stairs, gray eyes agleam, her lips drawn back in laughter, about to fling her bouquet down. The bridesmaids and the wedding guests were clustered in the hall below, white-gloved arms stretched up to catch the longed-for talisman, anticipation and friendly rivalry engraved upon their smiling faces. Towering above the other girls, nearly six feet tall, but with a delicacy of shape which marked her purely feminine, was Betty Decker, twice winner of the women's singles out at Albemarle and runner-up for swimming honors at the Crescent Pool events. The bride swung out the heavy bunch of lilies-of-the-valley and white violets, poised it for a moment, then dropped it into Betty's waiting hands.

But Betty failed to catch it. A scant four feet the bouquet had to fall to touch her outstretched fingers, but in the tiny interval of time required for the drop Betty seemed to stumble sideways, as though she had been jostled, and missed her catch by inches. The bridal nosegay hurtled past her clutching hands, and seemed to pause a moment in midair, as though another pair of hands had grasped it; then it seemed to flutter, rather than to fall, until it rested on the polished floor at Betty's feet.

"Rotten catch, old gal," commiserated Doris Castleman. "You're off your form; I could 'a' sworn you had it in the bag."

"I didn't muff it," Betty answered hotly. "I was pushed."

"No alibis," the other laughed. "I was right behind you, and I'll take my Bible oath that no one touched you. You were in the clear, old dear; too much champagne, perhaps."

De Grandin's small blue eyes were narrowed thoughtfully as he listened to the girls' quick thrust-and-parry. "The *petite mademoiselle* has right," he told me in a whisper. "No one touched the so unfortunate young lady who let her hope of early matrimony slip."

"But she certainly staggered just before she missed her catch," I countered.

"Everybody can't absorb such quantities of champagne as you can stow away and still maintain his equilibrium. It's a case of too much spirits, I'm afraid."

The little Frenchman turned a wide-eyed stare on me, then answered in a level, almost toneless voice: *"Prie Dieu* you speak in jest, my friend, and your fears have no foundation."

"THERE'S a gentleman to see yez, sors," Nora McGinnis announced apologetically. "I tol' 'im it wuz afther office hours, an' that ye're mos' partic'lar fer to give yerselves some time to digest yer dinners, but he sez as how it's mos' important, an' wud yez plase be afther seein' 'im, if only fer a minute?"

"Tiens, it is the crowning sorrow of a doctor's life that privacy is not included in his dictionary," answered Jules de Grandin with a sigh. "Show him in, *petite"*—Nora, who tipped the scales at something like two hundred pounds, never failed to glow with inward satisfaction when he used that term to her—"show him in all quickly, for the sooner we have talked with him the sooner we shall see his back."

The change which three short months had made in Frazier Taviton was nothing less than shocking. Barely forty years of age, tall, hound-lean, but well set up, his prematurely graying hair and martial carriage had given him distinction in appearance, and with it an appearance of such youth and strength as most men fifteen years his junior lacked. Now he seemed stooped and shrunken, the gray lights in his hair seemed due to age instead of accidental lack of pigment, and in the deep lines of his face and the furtive, frightened glance which looked out from his eyes, he saw the symptoms of a man who has been overtaken by a rapid and progressive malady.

"Step into the consulting-room," I said as we concluded shaking hands; "we can look you over better there," but:

"I'm not in need of going over, Doctor," Frazier answered with a weary smile; "you can leave the stethoscope and sphygmotonometer in place. This consultation's more in Doctor de Grandin's line."

"Très bien, I am wholly at your service, *Monsieur,"* the Frenchman told him. "Will you smoke or have a drink? It sometimes helps one to unburden himself."

Taviton's hand shook so he could hardly hold the flame to his cigar tip, and when he finally succeeded in setting it alight he paused, looking from one to the other of us as though his tongue could not find words to frame his crowding thoughts. Abruptly:

"You know I've always been in love with Agnes, Doctor?" he asked me almost challengingly.

"Well," I temporized, "I knew your families were close friends, and you were a devoted swain in high school, but——"

"Before that!" he cut in decisively. "Agnes Pemberton and I were sweethearts almost from the cradle!"

Turning to de Grandin he explained: "Our family homes adjoined, and from the time her nursemaid brought her out in her perambulator I used to love to look at Agnes. I was two years her senior, and for that reason always something of a hero to her. When she grew old enough to toddle she'd slip her baby fist in mine, and we'd walk together all around the yard. If her nurse attempted to interfere she'd storm and raise the very devil till they let her walk with me again. And the queer part was I liked it. You don't often find a three-year-old boy who'd rather walk around with a year-old girl than play with his toys, but I would. I'd leave my trains or picture books any time when I heard Agnes call, 'Frazee, Frazee,

here's Agnes!' and when we both grew older it was just the same. I remember once I had to fight half a dozen fellows because they called me sissy for preferring to help Agnes stage a party for her dolls to going swimming with them.

"We spent our summers in the Poconos, and were as inseparable there as we were in town. Naturally, I did the heavy work—climbed the trees to shake the apples down and carried home the sacks—but Agnes did her share. One summer, when I was twelve and she was ten, we were returning from a fox-grape hunt. Both of us were wearing sandals but no stockings; we couldn't go quite barefoot, for the mountain paths were rocky and a stone-bruised toe was something to avoid. Suddenly Agnes, who was walking close beside me, pushed me off the path into the bushes, and dived forward to snatch up a stick.

" 'Look out, Frazy, stay away!' she cried, and next instant I saw the 'stick' she had picked up was a three-foot copperhead. It had been lying stretched across the path, the way they love to, and in another step I'd have put my unprotected foot right on it. Copperheads don't have to coil to strike, either.

"There wasn't time to take a club or rock to it, so she grabbed the thing in her bare hands. It must have been preparing to strike my ankle, or the pressure of her hand against its head worked on its poison-sac; anyway, its venom spilled out on her hand, and I remember thinking how much it looked like mayonnaise as I saw it spurt out on her sun-tanned skin. The snake was strong, but desperation gave her greater strength. Before it could writhe from her grasp or slip its head far enough forward to permit it to strike into her wrist, she'd thrown it twenty feet away into the bushes; then the pair of us ran down the mountainside as if the devil were behind us.

" 'Weren't you scared, Aggie?' I remember asking when we paused for breath, three hundred yards or so from where we'd started running.

" 'More than I've ever been in my life,' she answered, 'but I was more scared the snake would bite you than I was of what it might do to me, Frazier dear.'

"I think that was the first time in my life that any woman other than my mother called me 'dear', and it gave me a queer and rather puffed-up feeling."

TAVITON paused a moment, drawing at his cigar, and a reminiscent smile replaced the look of anguished worry on his face. "We were full of stories of King Arthur and the days of chivalry," he continued, "so you mustn't think what happened next was anywise theatrical. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to us. 'When anybody saves another person's life that life belongs to him,' I told her, and went down upon one knee, took the hem of her gingham dress in my hand and raised it to my lips.

"She laid her hand upon my head, and it was like an accolade. 'I am your liege lady and you're my true sir knight,' she answered, 'and you will bear me faithful service. When we're grown I'll marry you and you must love me always. And I'll scratch your eyes out if you don't!' she added warningly.

"God, I wish she'd done it then!"

"Hein?" demanded Jules de Grandin. "You regret your sight, *Monsieur?*

"Trowbridge, *mon vieux,* you must examine me anon; my ears become impertinent!"

Taviton was earnest in reply: "You heard me quite correctly, sir. If I'd been blinded then the last thing I'd have seen would have been Agnes' face; I'd have had the memory of it with me always, and —I'd never have seen Elaine!"

"But, my dear boy," I expostulated,

"you're married to Agnes; Elaine's dead; there's nothing to prevent the realization of your happiness."

"That's what you think!" he answered bitterly.

"Listen: I believed that bunk they told us back in '17 about it's being a war to end all war and make the world a decent place to live in. I was twenty-three when I joined up. Ever seen war, gentlemen? Ever freeze your feet knee-deep in icy mud, have a million lice camp on you, see the man you'd just been talking to ripped open by a piece of shrapnel so his guts writhed from his belly like angleworms from a tin that's been kicked over? Ever face machine-gun fire or a bayonet charge? I did, within three months after I'd left the campus. Soldiers in the advanced sections go haywire, they can't help it; they've been through hell so long that just a little human kindness seems like paradise when they go back from the front.

"Elaine was kind. And she was beautiful. God, how beautiful she was!

"I'd gotten pretty thoroughly mashed up along the Meuse, and they sent me down to Biarritz to recuperate. It was a British nursing-station, and Elaine, who came from Ireland, was out there helping. She seemed to take to me at once; I've no idea why, for there were scores of better-looking fellows there and many who had lots more money. No matter, for some reason she was pleased with me and gave me every minute she could spare. Strangely, no one seemed to envy me.

"One night there was a dance, and I noticed that not many of the Scots or Irish, who were in the majority, seemed inclined to cut in on me. The English tried it, but the Gallic fellows passed us by as though we'd had the plague. Of course, that pleased me just as well, but I was puzzled, too.

"I shared a room with Alec MacMurtrie, a likable young subaltern from a Highland outfit who could drink more, smoke more and talk less than any man I'd ever seen. He was in bed when I reported in that night, but woke up long enough to smoke a cigarette while I undressed. Just before we said good-night he turned to me with an almost pleading look and told me, 'I'd wear a sprig o' hawthorn in my tunic when I went about if I were you, laddie.'

"I couldn't make him amplify his statement; so next day I talked with old MacLeod, a dour, sandy-haired and freckled minister from Aberdeen who'd come out as chaplain to as rank a gang of prayerful Scots as ever sashayed hell-for-leather through a regiment of Boche infantry.

" 'Mac, why should anybody wear a sprig of hawthorn in his tunic?' I demanded.

"He looked at me suspiciously, poked his long, thin nose deep in his glass of Scotch and soda, then answered with a steel-trap snap of his hard jaws: 'T' keep th' witches awa', lad. I dinna ken who's gi'en ye th' warnin', but 'tis sober counsel. Think it ower.' That was all that I could get from him.

"I WAS ready to go back to active duty when the Armistice was signed and everybody who could walk or push a wheel-chair got as drunk as twenty fiddlers' tikes. MacMurtrie was out cold when I staggered to our room, and I was sitting on my bed and working on a stubborn puttee when an orderly came tapping at the door with a chit for me. It was from Elaine and simply said: 'Come to me at once. I need you.'

"I couldn't figure what she wanted, but I was so fascinated by her that if she'd asked me to attempt to swim the

Channel without water-wings I'd have undertaken it.

"Her room was in a little tower that stuck up above the roof, removed from every other bedroom in the place, with windows looking out across the sea and gardens. It was so quiet there that we could hear the waves against the beach, and the shouting of the revelers came to us like echoes from a distant mountain-top.

"I knocked, but got no answer; knocked again, then tried the door. It was unfastened, and swung open to my hand. Elaine was lying on a sofa by the window with the light from two tall candelabra shining on her. She was asleep, apparently, and her gorgeous hair lay spread across the jade-green cushion underneath her head. You recall that hair, Doctor Trowbridge? It was like a molten flame; it glowed with dazzling brilliance, with here and there sharp sudden flashes as of superheated gold.

"She was wearing a green nightrobe of the filmiest silk crêpe, which shaded but hid nothing of her wonderfully made body. Her long green eyes were closed, but the long black lashes curled upon her cheeks with seductive loveliness. Her mouth was slightly parted and I caught a glimpse of small white teeth and the tip of a red tongue between the poinsettia vividness of her lips. The soft silk of her gown clung to the lovely swell of her small, pointed breasts, the tips of which were rouged the same rich red as her lips, her fingertips and toes.

"I felt as if my body had been drained of blood, as if I must drop limply where I stood, for every bit of strength had flowed from me. I stood and gazed upon that miracle of beauty, that green and gold and blood-red woman, absolutely weak and sick with overmastering desire.

"She stirred lazily and flung an arm across her eyes as she moaned gently. I stood above her, still as death.

"For a moment she lay there with the blindfold of her rounded arm across her face, then dropped it languidly and turned her head toward me.

"Her glowing green eyes looked up in my face, and the pupils seemed to widen as she looked. Her breath came faster and her body tensed, as though in sudden pain. Swift, almost, as a snake's, her scarlet tongue flicked over scarlet lips and opal teeth.

" 'You love me, Frazier, don't you?' she murmured in a throaty undertone which seemed to lose itself in the shadows where the candlelight had faded. 'You love me as only an American loves, with your heart and soul and spirit, and your chivalry and truth and faith?'

"I couldn't speak. My breath seemed held fast in my throat, and when I tried to form an answer only a hoarse, groaning sound escaped my lips.

"The pupils of her green eyes flared as with a sudden inward light, her lithe, slim body shook as with an ague, and she laughed a softly-purring laugh deep in her throat. 'Mine,' she murmured huskily. 'Mine, all mine for ever!'

"She raised her arms and drew me down to her, crushed my lips against her mouth till it seemed she'd suck my soul out with her stifling kiss.

"Half fainting as I was, she pushed me back, rolled up my tunic-cuff and bit me on the wrist. She made a little growling sound, soft and caressing, but, somehow, savage as the snarling of a tigress toying with her prey. Her teeth were sharp as sabers, and the blood welled from the wound like water from a broken conduit. But before I could cry out she pressed her mouth against the lesion and began to drink as though she were a famished traveler in the desert who had stumbled on a spring.

"She looked up from her draft, her red lips redder still with blood, and smiled at me. Before I realized what she did, she raised her hand and bit herself upon the wrist, then held the bleeding white limb up to me. 'Drink, belovèd; drink my blood as I drink yours,' she whispered hoarsely. 'It will make us one!'

"Her blood was salty and acerb, but I drank it greedily as I had drunk champagne an hour or two before, sucked it thirstily as she sucked mine, and it seemed to mount up to my brain like some cursèd oriental drug. A chill ran through me, as though a bitter storm-wind swept in from the sea; a red mist swam before my eyes; I felt that I was sinking, sinking in a lake of bitter, scented blood."

THE speaker paused and passed a hand across his forehead, where small gouts of perspiration gleamed. "Then——" he began, but Jules de Grandin raised his hand.

"You need not tell us more, *Monsieur,*" he murmured. "In England and America there is a silly superstition that seduction is exclusively a masculine prerogative. *Eh bien,* you and I know otherwise, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

Taviton looked gratefully at the small Frenchman. "Thanks," he muttered.

"MacLeod refused point-blank to marry us. 'I'd sooner gie ye'r lich t' th' kirkyard turf than join ye wie yon de'l's bairn,' he told me when I asked him.

"When we asked a priest to marry us we found French law required so much red tape—getting baptismal certificates and all that nonsense—that it was impractical; so I applied for leave to London, and Elaine joined me on the ship. We were married by the master just as soon as we were out of French territorial waters.

"I cabled home for funds and we had a grand time shopping, first in London, then at the Galeries LaFayette in Paris when my discharge came through.

"But I wasn't happy. Passion may be part of love, but it's no substitute. Elaine was like a quenchless fire; there was no limit to her appetites nor any satisfying them. She wanted me, and all that I possessed. I never saw her eat much heavy food, but the amount of caviar and oysters and pasties she consumed was almost past belief, and she drank enough champagne and brandy to have put a dipsomaniac to shame; yet I never saw her show the smallest sign of drunkenness. No kind of sport or exercise held any interest for her, but she'd dance all afternoon and until the final tune was played at night, and still be fresh when I was so exhausted that I thought I'd drop. Shopping never seemed to tire her, either. She could make the rounds of twenty stores, looking over practically the entire stock of each, then come home glowing with delight at what she'd purchased and be ready for a matinee or *thé dansant* and an evening's session at the supper clubs.

"When I appraised her thus and realized her shallowness and the selfishness which amounted to egotism, I felt I hated her; but more than that I loathed myself for having let her make a slave of me, and against the memory of her branding kisses and the night when we had drunk each other's blood there rose like a reproachful ghost the recollection of the evening I had said good-bye to Agnes just before I went to Dix to proceed to ship at Hoboken. How sweet and cool and comforting that last kiss seemed; there was something like a benediction in her promise, 'I'll be waiting for you, Frazier, waiting if it means for time and all eternity, and loving you each minute that I wait.'

"But when I lay in Elaine's arms so feverishly clasped it seemed our bodies melted and were fused in one, and felt

the sting of her hot kisses on my mouth, or the bitter tang of her blood in my throat, I knew that I was weak as wax in her hot grasp, and that she owned me bodily and spiritually. I was her slave and thing and chattel to do with as she liked, powerless to offer any opposition to her slightest whim.

"Her blood-lust was insatiable. Five, ten, a dozen times a night, she'd wound me with her teeth or nails, and drink my blood as though it had been liquor and she a famished drunkard. The Germans have a word for it: *Blutdurst*—blood-craving, the unappeasable appetite of the *blutsanger*, the vampire, for its bloody sustenance.

"Sometimes she'd make me take her blood, for she seemed to find as keen delight in being passive in a blood-feast as when she drank 'the red milk', as she called it.

"Sometimes she'd mutilate herself upon the hands and feet and under the left breast, then lie with outstretched arms and folded feet while I applied my lips to the five wounds. 'Love's crucifixion', she called it, and when she felt my mouth against the cuts upon her palms and side and insteps she would make small growling noises in her throat, and almost swoon in ecstasy.

"I was weak with loss of blood within three months, but as powerless to refuse my veins to her as I was to tell her that the sums she spent in shopping were driving me to bankruptcy.

"Things were changed when I came home to Harrisonville. My parents had both died with influenza while I was away. Agnes' father had committed suicide. He'd been in business as an importer, dealing exclusively with German houses, and the blockade of the Allies and our later entrance into the war completely ruined him. They told me when his bills were paid there was less than a hundred dollars left for Agnes.

"She made a brave best of it. Nearly everything was gone, but she furnished a small flat with odds and ends that no one bid for at the auction of her father's things, got a place as a librarian and carried on.

"She took my treachery standing, too. Some women would have tried to show their gallantry by being over-friendly, calling on us and asserting their proprietary rights as old friends of the bridegroom. Agnes stayed away with reserve and decency until our house was opened, then came to the reception quite like any other friend. Lord, what grit it must have taken to run the gauntlet of those pitying eyes! I don't believe there was a soul in town who didn't know we'd been engaged and that I'd let her down.

"If there were any bitterness in her she didn't show it. I think that my lips trembled more than hers when she took my hand and whispered, 'I'm praying for your happiness, Frazie.'

"God knows I needed prayers."

TEARS were streaming from de Grandin's eyes. *"La pauvre!"* he muttered thickly. *"La pauvre brave créature! Monsieur,* if you spend all of life remaining to you flat upon your face before *Madame* your wife, you fail completely to abase yourself sufficiently!"

"You're telling me?" the other answered harshly. "It's not for me I've come to you this evening, sir. Whatever I get I have coming to me, but Agnes loves me, God knows why. It's to try and save her happiness I'm here."

"Tiens, say on, *Monsieur,"* the little Frenchman bade. "Relate this history of perfidy and its result. It may be we can salvage something of the happiness you let slip by. What else is there to tell?"

"Plenty," rejoined Taviton. "Elaine

could not abide the thought of Agnes. 'That cold-faced baby; that dough-cheeked fool!' she stormed. 'What does she know of love? What has she to give a man—or what can she take from him? Say she's frigid, cold, unloving as a statue, icy-hearted as a fish!' she ordered. 'Say it, my lover. You won't? I'll kiss the words from you!' And when she held me in her arms again and stifled me with bloody kisses—Heaven help me!—I forswore my love, forgot the debt of life I owed to Agnes, and repeated parrotwise each wretched, lying slander that she bade me speak.

"It was a little thing that freed me from my slavery. We'd given up the house here and taken an apartment in New York. Elaine was in her element in the world of shops and theaters and night clubs; she hardly seemed to take a moment's rest, or to need it, for that matter. My old outfit was going to parade on Decoration Day in honor of the buddies who went west, and she set herself against my coming back to Harrisonville, even to participate in the parade. I don't think she cared a tinker's dam about my going, but she'd grown so used to having me obey her like a docile, well-trained dog it never seemed to occur to her that I might go when she forbade me. Perhaps, if she had pleaded or used her deadly, seductive power, she would have prevailed, but she'd grown so she had no respect for me. Seldom did she say so much as 'please' when ordering me about; I was necessary to her satisfaction—there never was a hint of any other man—but only as any other chattel that she owned. She showed no more affection for me than she might bestow upon her powder puff or lipstick. She loved the things providing creature comforts and sensory satisfaction; I was one. The endearing names she called me while she held me in her arms were purely reflex, a sort of orchestration to a dance of Sapphic passion.

" 'If you disobey me you'll be sorry all your life,' she warned as I left the house that morning.

"I went and marched with what remained of the old outfit. The excesses I'd been subject to had weakened me, and when the parade was dismissed I reeled and fell. Coroner Martin's ambulance had been assigned for public service, and they put me in it and took me to his funeral home. I thought he looked more serious than a little fainting-fit would warrant when he helped me to his private office and offered me a glass of brandy.

" 'Feeling stronger now, Frazier?' he asked.

" 'Yes, sir, thank you,' I replied as I handed back the glass, 'quite fit.'

" 'Strong enough to stand bad news?'

" 'I suppose so; I've stood it before, you know, sir.'

"He seemed at a loss for what to say, looking at his sets of record cases, at his wall safe and the telephone; anywhere except at me. Finally, 'It's Mrs. Taviton,' he told me. 'There's been an accident; she's been——'

" 'Killed?' I asked him as he hesitated.

"I felt like shouting, 'That's not bad news, man; that's tidings of release!' but I contrived to keep a look of proper apprehension on my face while I waited confirmation of my hope.

" 'Yes, son, she's been killed,' he answered kindly. 'They telephoned the police department an hour ago, and as you were marching then the police relayed the message to me. They knew I'd always served your family, and——'

" 'Of course,' I interrupted. 'Make all necessary arrangements with New York authorities, please, and send for her as soon as possible.' I had difficulty to keep from adding, 'And be sure you dig her

grave so deep that she'll not hear the judgment trumps!'

"Elaine had jumped or fallen from a window, fallen fourteen stories to a concrete pavement; but despite the fact that practically all her bones were broken Mr. Martin told me that her beauty was not marred. Certainly, there was no blemish visible as I sat beside her body on the night before the funeral.

"Mr. Martin was an artist. He had placed her in a casket of pale silver-bronze with écru satin lining and had clothed her in a robe of pale Nile green. Her head was turned a little to one side, facing me, and the soft black lashes swept her flawless cheeks so naturally it seemed that any moment they might rise and show the gleaming emerald of her eyes. One hand lay loosely on her breast, the fingers slightly curled as if in quiet sleep; the other rested at her side, and in the flickering light of the watch-candles I could swear I saw her bosom rise and fall in slumber.

"I could not take my eyes off her face. That countenance of perfect beauty I had looked upon so often, those slim, red-fingered hands and little satin-shod feet from which I'd drunk the blood at her command—it seemed impossible that they were now for ever quiet with the quietness of death.

" 'But it's release,' I told myself. 'You're free. Your bondage to this beautiful she-devil's done; you can——' the thought seemed profanation, and I thrust it back, but it came again unbidden: 'Now you can marry Agnes!'

"It was a trick of light and shadow, doubtless, but it seemed to me the dead lips in the casket curved in a derisive smile, and through the quiet of the darkened room of death there came, faint as the echo of an echo's echo, that whisper I had heard Armistice Night beside the sea at Biarritz: 'Mine! Mine; *all mine for ever!*'

"We buried her in Shadow Lawn, and Agnes sent me a brief note of sympathy. Within a month we saw each other, in two months we were inseparable as we had been before the war. Last winter she agreed to marry me.

"I THINK I knew how Kartophilos felt when he was reconciled with Heaven the night that Agnes promised she would be my wife. All that I'd forfeited I was to have. The promises of childhood were to be fulfilled. I put the memory of my marriage to Elaine behind me like an ugly dream, and a snatch of an old war song was upon my lips as I let myself into my bedroom:

> There's a kiss with a tender meaning,
> Other kisses you recall,
> But the kisses I get from you, sweetheart,
> Are the sweetest kisses of all . . .

"That night I'd had the sweetest kiss I'd known since I went off to war; life was starting afresh for me, I was——

"My train of happy thought broke sharply. My bedroom was instinct with a spicy, heady perfume, cloying-sweet, provocative as an aphrodisiac. I recognized it; it was a scent that cut through all the odors of the antiseptics a moment before I had first seen Elaine in the convalescent section of the nursing-home at Biarritz.

"I looked wildly round the room, but there was no one there. Stamping to the nearest window I sent it sailing up, and though it was a zero night outside I left it fully open till the last faint taint of hellish sweetness had been blown away.

"Shivering—not entirely from cold—I got in bed. As the velvet darkness settled down when I snapped off the light, I felt a soft touch on my cheek, a touch like that of soft, cold little fingers seeking my lips. I brushed my face as though a noisome insect crawled across it, and it seemed I heard a little sob—or perhaps

a snatch of mocking laugh—beside me in the darkness.

"I put my hand out wildly. It encountered nothing solid, but in the pillow next my head was a depression, as though another head were resting there, and the bedclothes by my side were slightly raised as if they shrouded slimly rounded limbs and small and pointed breasts.

"I dropped back, weak with panic terror, and against my throat I felt the tiny rasping scrape of little fingernails. How often that same feeling had awakened me from sleep when Elaine's craving for a draft of 'the red milk' was not to be denied! And then I heard—subjectively, as one hears half-forgotten music which he struggles to remember—'Give me your blood, belovèd, it will warm me. I am cold.' Then, sharp and clear as the echo of a sleigh's bells on a frosty night, repeated those six words which had been my bill of sale to slavery: 'Mine! Mine; all mine for ever!'

"I woke next morning with a feeling of malaise. Sure I'd suffered from a nightmare, I was still reluctant to rise and look into the mirror, and reluctance grew to dread when I put my hand up to my throat and felt a little smarting pain beneath my fingers. At last I took my courage in both hands and went into the bathroom. Sheer terror made me sick as I gazed at my reflection in the shaving-glass. A little semilunar scar was fresh upon my throat, the kind of scar a curved and pointed fingernail would make.

"Had Elaine come from the grave to set her seal on me; to mark me as her chattel now and ever?"

Taviton was shaking so he could not relight the cigar which had gone dead during his recital. Once again de Grandin helped him, steadying his hand as he held his briquette out; then: "And did this—shall we say phenomenon?—occur again, *Monsieur?*" he asked as matter-of-factly as he might have asked concerning a dyspepsia patient's diet.

"Yes, several times, but not always the same," the other answered. "I had a period of two weeks' rest, and had begun to think the visitation I had suffered was just a case of nerves, when something happened to convince me it was not a case of nightmare or imagination that had plagued me. Agnes and I were going to the first recital of the Philharmonic, and —I was luxuriating in renewing our old courtship days—I'd stopped off at the florist's on my way from the office and bought her a corsage of orchids. Of course, I might have had them sent, but I preferred to take them to her.

"I laid the box upon my bureau while I went in to shave. My bedroom door was closed and the bathroom door was open; no one—nothing animal or human —could have come into my room without my hearing it or seeing it, for my shaving-mirror was so placed that its reflection gave a perfect view of the entrance to the bedroom. Perhaps I was five minutes shaving, certainly not more than ten. The first thing that I noticed when I came back to my room was a heavy, spicy scent upon the air, sweet, penetrating, and a little nauseating, too, as though the very faintest odor of corruption mingled with its fragrance.

"I paused upon the threshold, sniffing, half certain that I smelled it, half sure my nerves were fooling me again. Then I saw. On the rug before the bureau lay the box the flowers came in. It was a heavy carton of green pasteboard, fastened with strong linen cord, enclosing an inner white box tied with ribbon. Both the outer and the inside boxes had been ripped apart as if they had been blotting-paper, and the tissue which had been about the flowers was torn to tatters, so it looked as though a handful of confetti had been spilled upon the floor.

The cord and ribbon which had tied the boxes were broken, not cut—you know how twine and ribbon fray out at the ends when pulled apart? The bouquet itself was mashed and torn and battered to a pulp, as though it first were torn to shreds, then stamped and trodden on.

"Again: We were going to the theater and I came home a little early to get into my dinner kit. I dressed with no mishaps and was taking down my overcoat and muffler in the hall when a vase of roses on the mantel toppled over, and absolutely drenched my shirt and collar. There was utterly no reason for that vase to fall. It stood firmly on the mantelshelf; nothing short of an earthquake could have shaken it over, yet it fell—no, that's not so; it didn't fall! I was six or eight feet from the fireplace, and even admitting some unfelt shock had jarred the rose-vase down, it should have fallen on the hearth. If it reached me at all, it should have rolled across the floor. But it didn't. It left its place, traveled the six or eight intervening feet through the air, and poured its contents over me from a height sufficient to soak my collar and the bosom of my shirt. I'm just telling you what happened, gentlemen, nothing that I guessed or surmised or assumed; so I won't say I heard, but *it seemed to me I heard* a faint, malicious laugh, a hatefully familiar mocking laugh, as the water from that rose-jar soaked and spoiled my linen.

"THESE things occurred in no set pattern. There was no regularity of interval, but it seemed as if the evil genius which pursued me read my mind. Each time when I'd manage to convince myself that I'd been the subject of delusion, or that the persecution had at last come to an end, there'd be some fresh reminder that my tormentress was playing cat-and-mouse with me.

"You were at my wedding. Did you see what happened when Agnes threw her bouquet down; how Betty Decker almost had it in her hands, and how——"

"*Parbleu*, yes, but you have right, *Monsieur!*" de Grandin interrupted. "By damn, did I not say as much to good Friend Trowbridge? Did I not tell him that this tall young *Mademoiselle* who all but grasped the flowers which *Madame* your charming wife had thrown did not miss them through a lack of skill? But certainly, of course, indubitably!"

"D'ye know what happened on our wedding night?" our guest demanded harshly.

De Grandin raised his shoulders, hands and eyebrows in a pained, expostulating shrug. "*Monsieur,*" he muttered half reproachfully, like one who would correct a forward child, "one hesitates to——"

"You needn't," cut in Taviton, a note of bitter mockery in his voice. "Whatever it may be you hesitate to guess, you're wrong!

"We went directly to Lenape Lodge up in the Poconos, for it was there twenty-eight years ago we'd plighted our troth the day that Agnes saved me from the snake.

"We had dinner in the little cottage they assigned us, and lingered at the meal. That first breaking of bread together after marriage seemed like something sacramental to us. After coffee we walked in the garden. The moon was full and everything about us was as bright as day. I could see the quick blood mount to Agnes' face as she bent her head and seemed intent on studying her sandal.

" 'I feel something like the beggar maid beneath Cophetua's window,' she told me with a little laugh. 'I've nothing but my love to bring you, Frazier.'

" 'But all of that?' I asked.

" 'All of that,' she echoed in a husky

whisper. 'Oh, my dear, please tell me that you love me that way, too; that nothing—*nothing*—can or will ever come between us. We've waited so long for each other, now I—I'm frightened, Frazier.'

"She clung to me with a sort of desperation while I soothed her. Finally she brightened and released herself from me.

" 'Five minutes I'll give you for a final cigarette. Don't be longer!' she called gayly as she ran into the cottage.

"That five minutes seemed eternity to me, but at last it was concluded, and I went into the house. The bedroom was in shadow, save where a shaft of moonlight struck across the floor, illuminating the foot of the big old-fashioned bedstead. Under the white counterpane I could see the small twin hillocks which were Agnes' feet; then, as I stood and looked at them, my breath came faster and my pulses raced with quick acceleration. There was the outline of another pair of upturned feet beneath that coverlet. 'Agnes!' I called softly, 'Agnes, dear!' There was no answer.

"Slowly, like a man wading through half-frozen water, I crossed the room, and put my hand upon the bed. The linen sank beneath my touch. There was nothing solid there, but when I took my hand away the bedclothes rose again, showing the contour of a supine body.

" 'She—it—can't do this to us!' I told myself in fury, and disrobed as quickly as I could, then got in bed.

"My hand sought Agnes', and I felt a touch upon it, soft as rose leaves, cold as lifeless flesh. Slim fingers closed about my own, fingers which seemed to grasp and cling like the tentacles of a small octopus, and which, like a devil-fish's tentacles, were cold and bloodless.

"I drew back with a start . . . surely this could not be Agnes, Agnes, soft and warm and loving, pulsing with life and tenderness. . . .

"Then I almost shrieked aloud in horror—'almost,' I say, because my mouth was stopped, even as I drew my lips apart to scream. A weight, light, yet almost unsupportable, lay upon my chest, my hips, my thighs. Moist lips were on my lips; small, sharp fingers ran like thin flames across my breast and cheeks; nails, small nails of dainty feet, yet sharp and poignant as the talons of a bird of prey, scratched lightly against the flesh of my legs, and a heavy strand of scented hair fell down each side my face, smothering me in its gossamer cascade. Then the quick, sharp ecstasy I knew so well, the instant pain, which died almost before it started with the anodyne of bliss, as the cut of razor-keen small teeth sank in my lips and the salty, hot blood flowed into my mouth. Slowly I could feel the nerve-force draining from me. Wave on wave, a flooding tide of lethargy engulfed me; I was sinking slowly, helplessly into unconsciousness.

"When I awoke the sun was streaming in the bedroom windows. Spots of blood were on my pillow, my lips were sore and smarting with a pain like iodine on a raw wound. Agnes lay beside me, pale and haggard. On her throat were narrow purple bruises, like the lines of bruise that small strong fingers might have left. I roused upon my elbow, looking in her face with growing horror. Was she dead?

"She stirred uneasily and moaned; then her gray eyes opened with a look of haunted terror, and her lips were almost putty-colored as she told me: 'It—she—was here with us last night. Oh, my love, what shall we do? How can we lose this dreadful earthbound spirit which pursues us?'

"WE LEFT Lenape Lodge that day. After what had happened we could no more bear to stay there than we could have borne to stay in hell. As

quickly as I could I made arrangements for a Caribbean voyage, and for a short time we had peace; then, without the slightest warning, Elaine struck again.

"A ball was being given at Castle Harbor and Agnes was to wear her pearls. They had been my mother's and Elaine had always been most partial to them. When she died I put them in a safe deposit vault, but later had them restrung and fitted with a new clasp for Agnes.

"I was dressed and waiting on the balcony outside our suite. Agnes was putting the finishing touches on her toilet when I heard her scream. I rushed into the bedroom to find her staring white-faced at her own reflection in the mirror, one hand against her throat. 'The pearls!' she gasped. '*She* was here; she took them —snatched them from my neck!'

"It was true. The pearls were gone, and within a little while a bruise appeared on Agnes' throat, showing with what force they had been snatched away. Naturally, as a matter of form, we hunted high and low, but there was no sign of them. We knew better than to notify the police; their best efforts, we knew but too well, would be entirely useless.

"I had a terrible suspicion which plagued me day and night, and though I didn't voice my thought to Agnes, I could hardly wait till we got home to prove the dreadful truth.

"As soon as we were back in Harrisonville I saw the superintendent of the cemetery and arranged a disinterment, telling him I had decided to place Elaine's body in another section of the plot. There were several obstacles to this, but Mr. Martin managed everything, and within a week they notified me that they were ready to proceed. I stood beside the grave while workmen plied their spades, and when the big steel vault was opened and the casket lifted out, Mr. Martin asked if I desired to look at her. As if I had another wish!

"He snapped the catches of the silver-bronze sarcophagus, and gently raised the lid. There lay Elaine, exactly as I'd seen her on the night before the funeral, her face a little on one side, one hand across her breast, the other resting at her side. A little smile, as though she knew a secret which was more than half a jest, was on her lips, and in the hand that rested on her breast, twined round the slender fingers like a rosary, was the string of pearls which had been snatched from Agnes' throat that night at Castle Harbor, a thousand miles and more away!

"I don't expect you to believe my unsupported word, but if you'll trouble to call Mr. Martin, he'll confirm my statement. He saw me take the pearls from her, and remarked how she seemed to cling to them, also that he had no recollection they were buried with her, and would have sworn they were not in the casket when he closed it."

TAVITON drew a long, trembling breath, and the look of settled melancholy had deepened on his stern and rather handsome face as he concluded: "And that is why I'm here tonight, Doctor de Grandin. Probably the old axiom that every man must bear the consequences of his own folly applies to me with double force, but there's Agnes to consider. Though I don't deserve it, she's in love with me, and her happiness is bound inextricably with mine. I've heard that you know more about these psychic phenomena than anyone, so I've come to see you as a last resort. Do you think that you can help us?"

De Grandin's small blue eyes were bright with interest as our caller finished his recital. "One can try," he answered, smiling. "You have been explicit in your narrative, my friend, but there are some

points which I should like to be enlightened on. By example, you have seen these manifestations in the form of force a number of times, you have smelled the perfume which *Madame* your *ci-devante* wife affected. You have seen her outline under cloth, and you, as well as Madame Taviton, have felt the contact of her ghostly flesh, but have you ever seen her in ocular manifestation?"

"N-o," answered Frazier thoughtfully, "I don't believe we have." Suddenly he brightened. "You think perhaps it's not Elaine at all?" he asked. "Possibly it's one of those strange cases of self-imposed hypnosis, like those they say the Hindoo fakirs stimulate among their audiences to make it seem they do those seemingly impossible——"

"*Pardonnez-moi, Monsieur,* I think nothing at all, as yet," the little Frenchman interrupted. "I am searching, seeking, trying to collect my data, that I may arrange it in an orderly array. Suppose I were a chemist. A patron brings me a white powder for analysis. He cannot tell me much about it, he does not know if it is poisonous or not, only that it is a plain white powder and he wishes to be told its composition. There are a hundred formulæ for me to choose from, so the first step is to segregate as many as I can; to find out what our so mysterious powder is definitely not before I can determine what it is. You could appreciate my difficulty in the circumstances? Very well, we are here in much the same predicament. Indeed, we are in worse case, for while chemistry is scientifically exact, occultism is the newest of the sciences, less than half emerged from silly magic and sillier superstition. It has not even a precise nomenclature by which one occultist can make his observations fully understood by others. The terminology is so vague that it is almost meaningless. What we call 'ghosts' may be a dozen different sorts of things. 'Spirits?' Possibly. But what sort of spirits? Spirits that are earthbound, having shed their fleshly envelopes, yet being unable to proceed to their proper *loci?* If so, why do they linger here? what can we do to help them on their way? Or are they possibly the spirits of the blessèd, come from Paradise? If so, what is their helpful mission? how can we assist them? Spirits of the damned, perhaps? What has given them their *passeport jaune* from hell? By blue, *Monsieur,* there are many things we must consider before we can commence to think about your case!"

"I see," the other nodded. "And the first thing to consider is——"

"Mrs. Taviton, sor!" announced Nora McGinnis from the study doorway.

SHE came walking toward us rapidly, the tips of silver slippers flashing with swift intermittence from beneath the hem of her white-satin dinner frock. Time had dealt leniently with Agnes Taviton. The skin of her clear-cut oval face was fresh and youthful as a girl's, despite her almost forty years; her short, waved hair, brushed straight back from her broad forehead, was bright as mountain honey, and there were no telltale wrinkles at the corners of her frank gray eyes. Yet there was a line of worry in her forehead and a look of fear in her fine eyes as she acknowledged my quick introduction and turned to Frazier.

"Dear," she exclaimed, "the emeralds, they're—she——"

"*Pardonnez-moi, Madame,*" de Grandin interrupted. "*Monsieur* your husband has recounted how your pearls were taken; now, are we to understand that other jewels——"

"Yes," she answered breathlessly, "tonight! My husband gave the emerald earrings to me—they had been his great-great-grandmother's—and as the stones

were so extremely valuable I didn't dare have them reset in screws. So I had my ears pierced, and the wounds have been a little slow in healing. Tonight was the first time I felt I dared take out the guard-rings and try the emeralds on. I'd brought them from the safe and put them on my dresser; then as I raised my hands to disengage the guard-ring from my left ear I felt a draft of chilly air upon my shoulders, something seemed to brush past me —it was like the passage of a bird in flight, or perhaps that of an invisible missile—and next instant the velvet case in which the emeralds rested disappeared."

"*Eh,* disappeared, *Madame?*" de Grandin echoed.

"Yes, that's the only way that I can put it; I didn't actually see them go. The chill and movement at my back startled me, and I turned round. There was nothing there, of course, but when I turned back to my bureau they were gone."

"Did you look for them?" I asked with fatuous practicality.

"Of course, everywhere. But I knew it was no use. They went the same way that the pearls did—I recognized that sudden chill, that feeling as if something —*something evil*—hovered at my shoulder, then the · ·tle and the disappearance. And," she added w' ʜ a shuddering sigh, "those emeralds went to the same place the pearls went, too!"

"Thank Heaven you'd not put them in your ears!" broke in her husband. "You remember how she bruised your throat that night she snatched the pearls——"

"Oh, let her have them!" Agnes cried. "I don't want the vain things, Frazier. If hoarding jewelry like a jackdaw gives her restless spirit peace, let her have them. She can have——"

"Excuse me, if you please, *Madame,*" de Grandin interrupted in a soft and toneless voice. "Monsieur Taviton has placed your case with me, and I say she shall not have anything. Neither your jewelry, your husband, your peace of mind—*corbleu,* she shall not have so much as one small grave to call her own!"

"But that's inhuman!"

The Frenchman turned a fixed, unwinking stare on her a moment; then, "*Madame,*" he answered levelly, "that which pursues you with the threat of ruined happiness also lacks humanity."

"Perhaps you're right," said Agnes. "She stole Frazier from me; now she takes the jewels, not because she has a use for them, but because she seems determined to take everything I have. Please, Doctor de Grandin, please make sure she doesn't take my husband, whatever else she takes."

I had a momentary feeling of uncertainty. Were these three sane and grown-up people whom I listened to, these men and woman who talked of a dead woman's stealing jewelry, discussing what she might have and what she might not take, or were they children playing gruesome make-believe or inmates of some psychopathic ward in some mysterious way brought to my study?

"Don't you think we'd better have a glass of sherry and some biscuit?" I suggested, determined to negotiate the conversation back to sanity.

DE GRANDIN sipped his sherry thoughtfully, taking tiny bites of biscuit in between the drinks, more for the sake of appearance than from any wish for food. At length: "Where are the pearls which were abstracted from *Madame* your wife's throat?" he asked Taviton.

"I put them in the safe deposit vault," the other answered. "They're still there, unless——"

"Quite so, *Monsieur,* one understands. It is highly probable they are still there, for these prankish tricks *Madame la Revenante* is fond of playing seem con-

cerned more with your personal annoyance than your valuables. I would that you have imitations of those pearls made just as quickly as you can. Be sure they are the best of duplicates, and match the gems they copy both in weight and looks. You apprehend?"

"Yes, of course, but why——"

"*Tiens,* the less one says, the less one has cause for regret," the Frenchman answered with a smile.

ALTHOUGH I had retired from obstetrics several years before, there were times when long association with a family made me break my resolution. Such a case occurred next evening, and it was not till after midnight that I saw the red and wrinkled voyageur on life's way securely started on his earthly pilgrimage and his mother safely out of danger. The house was dark and quiet as I put my car away, but as I paused in the front hall I saw a stream of light flare from beneath the pantry door.

"Queer," I muttered, walking toward the little spot of luminance; "it's not like Nora to go off to bed with those lights burning."

A blaze of brightness blinded me as I pushed back the door. Seated on the kitchen table, a cut loaf of bread and a partially dismembered cold roast pheasant by his side, was Jules de Grandin, a tremendous sandwich in one hand, a glass of Spanish cider bubbling in the other. Obviously, he was very happy.

"Come in, *mon vieux,*" he called as soon as he could clear his mouth of food. "I am assembling my data."

"So I see," I answered. "I've had a trying evening. Think I'll assemble some, too. Move over and make room for me beside that pheasant, and pour me a glass of cider while you're at it."

"*Mon Dieu,*" he murmured tragically, "is it not enough that I come home exhausted, but I must wait upon this person like a slave?" Then, sobering, he told me:

"I am wiser than I was this morning, and my added wisdom gives me happiness, my friend. Attend me, if you please. First to Monsieur Martin's I did go all haste, and asked him the condition of the body of that pretty but extremely naughty lady who pursues Monsieur and Madame Taviton. He tells me it showed signs of slight desiccation when they opened up the casket to retrieve the pearls, that it was like any other body which had been embalmed, then sealed hermetically in a metallic case. Is that not encouraging?"

"Encouraging?" I echoed. "I don't see how. If a corpse buried eighteen months doesn't look like a corpse, how would you expect it to look—like a living person?"

His eyes, wide and serious, met mine above the rim of his champagne glass. "But certainly; what else?" he answered, quite as if I'd asked him whether three and two made five.

"You recall how I compared myself to an analyst last night? *Bon,* this is the first step in my analysis. I cannot say with certainty just what we have to fight, but I think that I can say with surety what it is *not* we find ourselves opposed to. You asked me jestingly if I had thought to find a body seemingly alive and sleeping in that casket. Frankly, I shall say I did. Do you know what that would have portended?"

"That Martin was either drunk, crazy or a monumental liar," I answered without hesitation.

"*Non,* not at all, unfortunately. It would have meant that we were dealing with a vampire, a corpse undead, which keeps itself sustained by sucking live men's blood. There lay a dreadful danger, for as you doubtless know, those whom the vampire battens on soon die, or seem to die, but actually they enter in

that half-world of the dead-alive, and are vampires in their turn. From such a fate, at least, Monsieur and Madame Taviton are safe. *Eh bien,* I have but started on my work. It is now incumbent on me to determine what it is we fight. I was considering the evidence when you came in:

"From what we know of Madame Taviton the first, she was a person of strong passions. Indeed, her whole existence centered on her appetites. It was not for nothing that the Fathers of the Church classed lust among the seven deadly sins. And she had so surrendered to her passions that she might be called one single flaming, all-consuming lust wrapped in a little envelope of charming flesh. *Tiens,* the flesh is dead, snuffed out of life in all its charm of evil beauty, but the lust lives on, quenchless as the fires of hell. Also hate survives, and hate is a very real and potent force. As yet this evil thing of lust and hate and vanity has not found strength to take material form, but that will come, and soon, I think, and when it comes I fear she will be bent on working mischief. Hatred is a thing that gains in strength while it feeds upon itself."

"But according to Taviton she came first as a perfume, then made him feel her fierce sadistic kisses," I objected. "That's pretty near materialization, isn't it?"

"Near, but not quite," he answered. "Everything which this one wants she takes. When she came as a perfume she had not strength to make her presence physically felt, but by *willing* him to smell the scent she turned his thoughts on her. Thoughts are things, my friend, make no mistake concerning that. Once Monsieur Taviton was thinking of her, she was able from the psychoplasm he thus generated to construct the invisible but able-to-be-felt body with which she fondled and caressed him, ever concentrating his thoughts more strongly on her memory, thus gaining greater strength."

"I don't follow you," I countered. "You say she made him think of her, and merely from that——"

"Entirely from that, *mon vieux.* This psychoplasm, which we cannot certainly define any better than we can electricity, is something generated by the very act of thinking. It is to the mind what ectoplasm is to the body. Apparently it is more substantial than mere vibrations from the body, and seems, rather, to be an all-penetrating and imponderable emanation which is rapidly dissipated in the atmosphere, but in certain circumstances may be collected, concresced and energized by the will of a skilled spiritualist medium—or an active discarnate intelligence. Generally in such cases it becomes faintly luminous in a dark room; again, when very strongly concentrated, it may be made the vehicle to transmit force —to hurl a jar of roses or snatch a strand of pearls, by example."

"Or to inflict a bite?"

"Most especially to inflict a bite," he nodded. "That adds fuel to the ready-blazing fire, more power to the dynamo which already hums with power-generation. The Scriptures speak more categorically than is generally realized when they affirm the blood is the life. With the imbibation of the emanations of his rich, warm blood she gained the strength to make it possible for her to thrust herself between him and his bride upon their wedding night, to choke poor Madame Agnes senseless, and to play the sadist wanton with him after death as she had done so many times in life. But her very wanton wickedness shall put her in our power, I damn think."

"How's that?"

"She follows such a pattern that her acts can be predicted with a fair degree of certainty. She hates poor Madame

Agnes so that she will go to any length to plague her. She stole her pearls, she stole her emeralds. Now the pearls have been recovered. If Madame Agnes were to put them on again, do not you think that she could come and try to repossess them?"

"It's possible."

"Possible, *pardieu?* It is more than possible; it is likely!"

"Well——"

"Yes, my friend, I think that it is well. Ghostly manifestations, materializations of spirit-forms, are peculiarly creatures of the darkness and the twilight. Bright sunlight seems to kill them as it kills spore-bearing germs. So do certain forms of sound-vibration, the sonorous notes of church bells and of certain kinds of gongs, for instance. High-frequency electric currents, the emanations of radium salt or the terrific penetrative force of Röntgen rays should have the same effect, *n'est-ce-pas?"*

"I suppose so, but I can't say that I understand."

"No matter, that is not essential. But if you will wait I'll show you what I mean before you are much older. Meantime, the hour is late, the bottle empty and I have much to do tomorrow. Come let us go to bed."

"ALL is prepared," he informed me the next night at dinner. "I had some little difficulty in assembling my armament, but at last I have it all complete. We are ready to proceed at your convenience."

"Proceed? Where?"

"To Monsieur Taviton's. He telephoned me that the imitation pearls are ready, and—*corbleu,* I think that we shall see what we shall see tonight!"

The Tavitons were waiting for us in their drawing-room. Always poised and calm, Agnes nevertheless displayed something of that look of mingled hope and apprehension shown by relatives when someone dear to them has undergone a major operation. Looking at her pleading eyes, I almost expected to hear the old familiar "How is he doing, Doctor?" as I took her hand in greeting. Frazier was plainly on the rough edge of collapse, his movements jerky, eyes furtive, voice sharpened to the point of shrillness.

"You're sure that it will work?" he asked de Grandin.

"As sure as one can be of anything—which is, *hélas,* not very sure at all," the Frenchman answered. "However, we can make the effort, eh, my friend?"

"What——" I began, but he motioned me to silence.

"Madame," he bowed to Agnes in his courtly foreign fashion, "you are ready?"

"Quite, Doctor," she replied, rising to cross the hall and spin the handles of the wall-safe. The tumblers clicked, the little door fell open, and from the strongbox she removed a long jewel-case of night-black plush. For a moment she regarded it half fearfully, then snapped it open, drew out the strand of gleaming pearls it held and clasped it round her throat.

"Why, those are surely not an imi——" I began when a brutal kick upon my shin warned me de Grandin wished me to keep silent.

Scarcely whiter than their wearer's slender throat, the sea-gems glinted luminously as Agnes joined us in the drawing-room, cast an apprehensive glance around, then sank down in a chair beside the empty fireplace.

"Brandy or cream?" she asked matter-of-factly, busying herself with the coffee service on the table at her knee.

"Brandy, *s'il vous plait,"* de Grandin answered, rising to receive his cup and snapping off the light-switch as he did so.

We were playing at the social amenities, but the very air was pregnant with

expectancy. The rumble of a motor truck bound for the Hudson Tunnels seemed louder than an earthquake's roar; the howling of a dog in the next yard was eery as the wailing of a banshee. I could hear the little French-gilt clock upon the mantelpiece beat off the seconds with its sharp, staccato tick, and in the hall beyond the more deliberate rhythm of the floor clock. In my waistcoat pocket I could hear my own watch clicking rapidly, and by concentrating on the varied tempos I could almost make them play a fugue. Autumn was upon us; through the open window came a gust of chilling air, fog-laden, billowing out the silk-net curtains and sending a quick shiver down my neck and spine. De Grandin took a lump of sugar in his spoon, poured brandy over it and set the flame of his briquette against it. It burned with a ghastly, bluish light. The dog in the next yard howled with a quavering of terror, his ululation rising in a long crescendo.

The strain was breaking me. "Confound that brute——" I muttered, rising from my chair, then cut my malediction off half uttered, while a sudden prickling came into my scalp and cheeks, and a lump of superheated sulfur seemed thrust in my throat. At the farther corner of the room, like a pale reflection of the alcoholic flare which burned above de Grandin's coffee cup, another light was taking form. It was like a monster pear, or, more precisely, like a giant waterdrop, and it grew bright and dim with slow and pulsing alternations.

I tried to speak, but found my tongue gone mute; I tried to warn de Grandin with a sign, but could not stir a muscle.

And then, before I had a chance to repossess my faculties, it struck. Like a shot hurled from a catapult something sprang across the room, something vaguely human in its shape, but a dreadful parody on humankind. I heard Frazier give a startled cry of terror and surprize as the charging horror dropped upon his shoulders like a panther on a stag, flinging him against the floor with such force that his breath escaped him in a panting gasp.

AGNES' scream was like an echo of her husband's startled cry, but the spirit of the little girl who dared the snake to save her youthful sweetheart still burned gallantly. In an instant she was over Frazier, arms outstretched protectingly, eyes wide with horror, but steady with determination.

A laugh, light, titillating, musical, but utterly unhuman, sounded in the dark, and the visitant reached out and ripped the pearls from Agnes' throat as easily as if they had been strung on cobweb. Then came the ripping sound of rending silk, the flutter of torn draperies, and Agnes crouched above her man as nude as when the obstetrician first beheld her, every shred of clothes rent off by the avenging fury.

Birth-nude, across the prostrate body of the man they faced each other, one intent on horrid vengeance, one on desperate defense.

Agnes' lissome body was perfection's other self. From slender, high-arched feet to narrow, pointed breasts and waving golden hair she was without a flaw, as sweetly made and slender as a marble naiad carved by Praxiteles.

Her opponent was incarnate horror. Hideous as a harpy, it still was reminiscent of Elaine as an obscene caricature recalls the memory of a faithful portrait. Where red-gold hair as fine as sericeous web had crowned Elaine's small head, this phantom wore an aureole of flickering tongues of fire—or hair which blew and fluttered round the face it framed in the blast of some infernal superheated breeze. The eyes, which glowed with virid phosphorescence, started forward in their

sockets, lids peeled away until it seemed that they had broken with the pressure of the eyeballs. The mouth was squared in a grimace of fury, and the white, curved teeth gleamed pale against the blowzed and staring lips like dead men's bones drowned in a pool of blood. Fingers, strictly speaking, there were none upon the hands, but a thick and jointless thumb and two bifurcations of the flesh made beast-paws at the end of either wrist, curved claws like vultures' talons growing at their tips. Upon each heel there grew a horny, spur-like knob, and the knotty-jointed toes were mailed with claws like digits of some unclean carrion fowl. The body was well formed and comely, but the breasts were long and pendulous, like pyriform excrescences hanging half-deflated from the thorax.

I put my hand across my eyes to shut the horrid vision out, for in an instant I was sure the dreadful, claw-armed thing would tear the quivering flesh from Agnes' bones as it had rent the clothing from her body.

A rumbling, like the moving of a heavy piece of furniture, sounded at my back, and as I turned around I saw de Grandin trundling a dental X-ray stand across the floor. As an artillerist prepares his piece for action, the Frenchman swung the lens of his contrivance into line, and next instant came a snapping crackle as the high potential current set the cathode rays to darting through the Crookes' tube.

"*Ha, Madame la Revenante,* you see that Jules de Grandin is prepared!" he announced, the elation of the killer who takes pleasure in his task shining in his small blue eyes and sounding in his voice.

As the Röntgen ray fell on the clawing horror it let out a shriek that pierced my eardrums like a white-hot wire.

As though the devilish form were painted on the atmosphere and de Grandin held a powerful eraser, it was wiped away — obliterated utterly — while he turned the flanged lens of his apparatus back and forth, up and down, like a gardener directing water from a hose.

The last faint vestige of the dreadful apparition vanished, and he snapped down the trigger which controlled the current.

"Look to Madame Agnes, my friend, *elle est nue comme la main!*" he commanded, rushing from the room to seize the telephone, dial a number in hot haste and call, "*Allo,* is Monsieur Martin there? *Très bien, Monsieur,* proceed at once, we wait on you!"

I advanced a step toward Agnes, mute with sheer embarrassment, but I might have been a chair or sofa, for all the notice she gave me. Unconscious of her nudity as though the very beauty of her body were sufficient raiment, she bent above her husband and clasped his head against her bosom. "My dear," she murmured crooningly, like a mother who would soothe her fretful babe, "my poor, sweet, persecuted dear, it's all right now. She's gone, belovèd, gone for ever; nothing more shall come between us now!"

"Come away, thou species of a cabbage plant!" de Grandin's whisper sounded in my ear. "That conversation, it is sacred. Would you eavesdrop, *cochon?* Have you no delicacy, no decency at all, *cordieu?*"

With due reverence Jules de Grandin raised the bottle with its green-wax seal flaunting the proud N of the Emperor and poured a scant two ounces of the ancient cognac into the bell-shaped brandy sniffers. "But it was simple, once I had the cue," he told me smilingly. "First of all, my problem was to find what sort of thing opposed us. Monsieur Martin's assurance that the body was a naturally-dead one greatly simplified my task. Very well, then, I must proceed not

against a vampire or a vitalized corpse, but against a thing which had a psychoplasmic body. *Ha,* that was not so difficult, for I knew all surely that the powerful vibrations of the Röntgen ray would batter it to nothingness if I could but contrive to lure it within range of my machine.

"Good, then. Madame Elaine is cruel, vicious, lustful. Also she is panting for revenge on Madame Agnes, and perhaps she tires of making savage love to Monsieur Frazier, and will do him violence, too. So I contrive my plan. With an imitation of the pearls we lured her to the house. She comes, all filled with fury to wreak a horrid vengeance on Monsieur and Madame Taviton. She strikes, *mon Dieu,* how savagely she strikes! But so do I, by blue! I have rented from the dental dépôt a small X-ray apparatus, one which can be aimed as though it were a gun. When her fierce specter rises in our midst I meet it with my X-ray fire. I wither her, I break her up, *parbleu,* I utterly destroy her, me!

"Meanwhile, I have arrangements made with Monsieur Martin. He has disinterred her body, has it ready at the crematory, waiting my instructions. The minute I have triumphed with my X-ray gun, I call him on the telephone. Immediately into the retort of the crematory goes all that is mortal of Madame Elaine. Into nothingness goes that spirit-form she has constructed with such labor. Body and spirit, she is through, completed; finished! Yes, it is so."

"But d'ye mean to tell me you can destroy a ghost with Röntgen rays?" I asked incredulously.

"Tell me, my friend," he answered earnestly, "were you in the Taviton drawing-room this evening?"

"Why, of course, but——"

"And did you see what happened when I turned the X-ray on that spectral horror?"

"I did, but——"

"Then why ask foolish questions? Are not your own two eyes sufficient witnesses?"

Silenced, I ruminated for a moment; then: "Elaine was beautiful," I mused aloud, "yet that thing we saw tonight was——"

"The death mask of her soul!" he supplied. "The body she was born into was beautiful, but her soul and mind were hideous. When she was no longer able to dwell in her natural body, she made herself a second body out of psychoplasm. And it matched the mind which fashioned it as a plastic cast will duplicate the model to which it is applied. The creature which the world saw while she was in the flesh was a false-face, the whitewashed outside of the reeking charnel which was she. Tonight we saw her as she truly was. *Tiens,* the sight was not a pretty one, I think."

"But——"

"*Ah bah!*" he interrupted with a yawn. "Why speculate? I have told you all I know, and much that I surmise. Me, I am tired as twenty horses. Let us take a drink and go to sleep, my friend. What greater happiness can life give tired men?"

"The face peered evilly at her."

The Satin Mask

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

What weird doom made the wearing of that old mask so deadly? A strange and eery story

MONICA JANNERLIE picked up the last of her mother's carefully hoarded letters and looked at the postmark. This letter, like most of them, was from her mother's sister Juliet, dead, too, like her mother. She unfolded it musingly. She was a little tired, and could not help wondering why Aunt

Susan had kept all these letters for her inspection. This last letter was quite short:

> Dear Anna, Bellini has just sent me the most gorgeous mask from Florence. It is of yellow satin, and it is too beautiful, too beautiful. If and when I come, I shall bring it. But just imagine, he says I must not wear it. There is something about an old Italian superstition. He is so temperamental, so emotional. But the mask is lovely, and I must wear it, I must. Such a rich, lustrous yellow, and so soft to feel! It is all but alive, Anna.
>
> JULIET.

Monica turned the letter over, regarding it gravely and curiously, conscious of a feeling of uneasiness at the tone of this letter written so shortly before her Aunt Juliet's death. She folded the letter and returned it to its envelope. Then she packed all the letters neatly back into the box from which she had begun to take them hours before.

She rose and stood for a few moments irresolute. Then, after restoring the box of letters to the closet, she left the room, walking softly into the hall to stand quietly on the landing looking down and listening for any sound from below. The large, old-fashioned grandfather's clock at the foot of the stairs gave off a measured tick-tock; there was no other sound.

She turned and glanced furtively down the hall. Would there be time, she wondered, to slip into Aunt Juliet's room, which Aunt Susan kept so carefully locked? She moved down the hall impulsively and came to a stop before the closed door of the room in which her Aunt Juliet had died. Boldly she took down the key which Aunt Susan kept along the top of the door-frame, put it into the lock, and, after some little difficulty, threw the door open. Her hand felt for the light switch, for, since the curtain covered the single window from the inside, the room was dark as night.

Light flooded the room. Standing on the threshold, Monica was somewhat disappointed. She could not say what she had expected to find. The room was very ordinary, certainly as ordinary as any other room in the house. Her sudden interest collapsed, and she was just about to withdraw from the room when her eye caught a bright gleam from the wall near the curtained window. She stepped forward and saw that the gleam had come from a yellow object hanging on a hook in the wall. Instinctively Monica divined what it was, and with a little involuntary cry she moved quickly to the wall and took the mask from the hook. It was faded and old, but still beautiful with the beauty of old things. As she stood looking at it, she felt a deep, strong wish to own the mask.

The sound of a car stopping before the house sent her hurrying from the room. She took the mask with her, running into her room to hide it there, and emerging in time to be descending the stairs as the front door opened to admit Aunt Susan, followed by Uncle Henry and Cousin Alice.

MONICA wanted to ask at once about the mask, but it was not until dinner that evening that she got the opening she desired. Aunt Susan, tired at last of telling about the afternoon's motor trip, asked abruptly, "And did you go through all the letters, Monica?"

Monica nodded. "They were quite interesting," she said.

"Oh, your aunt was a good correspondent; she wrote such perfect letters. Did you find any you wanted to keep?"

"A few, yes. But there weren't many. Aunt Juliet's last letter was a little exciting, I thought."

"Which was that?"

Alice looked up suddenly; a grave girl of Monica's own age, twenty-two. "Why, mother, don't you remember Aunt Juliet's last letter to Aunt Anna?"

Aunt Susan looked startled, glancing

quickly at her husband across the table, and then at her niece, who was speaking.

"It mentioned someone I took to be her lover," Monica was saying, unaware of the sudden tension, "if I dare venture to guess, and of a lovely present he made her—a satin mask. Who was Bellini?"

Three pairs of eyes were fixed upon Monica Jannerlie so intently that she felt as if she had somehow committed a grave error. With one accord, the three, Monica's uncle, aunt, and cousin, had stopped eating.

It was her Uncle Henry who broke the suddenly intolerable silence. He grunted awkwardly and, looking at Monica over his pince-nez as a parent might look at a recalcitrant child, said firmly, "Bellini was an Italian."

A little nonplussed, Monica said, "Well, really, I thought he might be, Uncle Henry. I mean, who was he—a friend of Aunt Juliet's?"

Her uncle looked across the table at his wife.

Aunt Susan interposed. "Bellini was a very dear friend of Juliet's; I think she might have married him if—if she hadn't died."

"Oh, what a shame!" said Monica.

"He was a handsome man, dark, you know, like most Italians. I think they had planned the wedding to take place as soon as he returned from a trip to Italy."

Uncle Henry cut in sharply. "I didn't like the man, and never did see what Juliet saw in him."

His wife frowned ever so slightly. "Tut, tut, Henry—you barely knew Bellini."

"And the mask," Monica put in, "did Aunt Juliet ever wear it—as she had planned to do?"

Aunt Susan's hands began to tremble; she got up abruptly and left the table. Alice bit her lip.

Monica was astonished. What had she done? They had never acted like this before. Uncle Henry dabbed at his lips with his napkin. Then he looked at his niece, turning his head a little sideways, and, with his lips muffled by the napkin, said, "She wore the mask, yes." Then he, too, pushed his chair from the table and stalked away.

Monica looked appealingly at her cousin. "Alice, what is it? What have I done?"

Alice said, "Nothing you could help, Monica. Please don't think about it."

"But something is wrong," she protested. "Is it about Bellini—or the mask?"

Alice looked at her gravely, hesitating to speak. "Both," she replied at last, looking nervously away from Monica.

"Will you tell me?" Monica asked gently.

Alice nodded suddenly. "Yes, I will. *I* think you should know. Mother and father think you shouldn't; so you must promise not to let them know I told you."

Monica nodded. "I shan't say a word."

"I scarcely know where to begin," said Alice, "there's so little to say. The mask, there was something about it—an old superstition. I don't rightly know what it was, to tell the truth. The mask was not to be worn. There's a letter of Bellini's somewhere about, explaining it, unless mother's destroyed it. He sent it to Aunt Juliet with strict instructions not to wear the mask." She smiled a little helplessly. "Really, my dear, I don't know how to make it sound plausible. Aunt Juliet wore the mask, and shortly after, she took sick and died. Just wasted away. The doctor couldn't say what was the matter." She rose abruptly. "I must go, or they will think I am telling you."

"And Bellini?" asked Monica. "What did he do, when he heard?"

For a moment Alice looked at her cousin inscrutably. Her hand tightened

about her handkerchief, and she turned her eyes away, saying in a voice so small that it could scarcely be heard, "Bellini shot himself—the moment he knew!"

Then she went quickly from the room, leaving Monica to look after her in chaotic amazement.

As the door closed behind Alice, Monica half rose, then sat down again. But in an instant she was up again, going quickly from the table toward the stairs and her own room. There she went at once to the bureau, looking for the letter from her mother which had told her of Aunt Juliet's death. What had she done at table to set them all at odds with her? There must have been something about Aunt Juliet's strange death, or Bellini.

She found the right letter easily enough, and drew it out, hoping it might furnish some clue other than the suggestions Alice had made.

But Monica had forgotten how small she was when her mother had sent it:

My own darling child, Mother has very sad news for you. Your dear Aunt Juliet died this afternoon at half-past two o'clock. Papa is on the way to get you and bring you here. . . .

No, there was nothing there.

She put the letter away again and sat down on the bed, her hands folded helplessly in her lap. Alice had hinted that the satin mask, the beautiful yellow mask, had something to do with Aunt Juliet's death. But how could it?

The sound of footsteps on the stairs broke into her thoughts. In a moment a light tap sounded on the door, and her Aunt Susan looked in. Seeing Monica, she slipped into the room and closed the door behind her, standing against it.

"I'm sorry about what happened at table," said Monica at once.

"No, no, it's not your fault, Monica," said her aunt. "It's mine. I had no right to give way to my feelings like that. And you didn't know, because I had kept it from you."

"What do you mean, Aunt Susan?"

The older woman came over and sat down dejectedly in a rocking-chair facing Monica. "It's about your aunt, the mask, and Bellini. It's a strange thing to say, Monica, but your aunt didn't die a natural death. She was killed by something we could not then, and cannot yet understand, and it's painful for us to remember. I've been wrong in keeping this from you so long, especially since I knew you would see her last letter to your mother.

"Your aunt got the mask from Bellini, as you know. He was madly in love with her, and sent her any number of pretty things from abroad. He sent the mask with his warning not to wear it; that was a mistake, for he thought of her in terms of his own temperament, which accepted superstitions and all that goes with them. He wrote her a long letter explaining what was believed about the mask's power.

"It is dangerous to wear the thing because strange properties attach to it. Bellini wrote that a single wearing of the mask gave the wearer certain psychic powers; she could see especially the mask's former owner or owners. But the most terrible property of the mask, he wrote, was this: it killed its wearer. It was vampiric. He wrote at length of a terrible family curse which had been attached to the mask and its owners. He was not entirely clear, but I gathered that the mask had originally been obtained from its maker by an avaricious young woman, the Principessa Guarantano. Then there's a rigmarole about a curse imposed upon the Guarantano women by the mask's maker, a curse that apparently attached to the mask and anyone who wore it. Of course, Bellini said

the Principessa died, and another of the Guarantano women after her, and then the family sold him the mask."

She paused in some distress, but forced herself to go on.

"Your aunt wore the mask. Shortly after, she complained of feeling ill, of seeing visions—especially two tall, thin ladies with black hair and glittering eyes. She got steadily weaker and weaker, and at last she died. Then Bellini came. He heard the story, and he told us that the ladies of Juliet's visions were the Italian princesses who had owned the mask and died after wearing it. The mask linked them to a hideous life after death.—And then Bellini shot himself."

"It's hard to believe," said Monica simply.

The older woman nodded. "I know. I have always tried to look on it as a terrible coincidence, but I can't. I'd like to think there was no need for me to believe it."

When Aunt Susan had gone, Monica went at once to get the mask from the place where she had hidden it. She gazed at it steadily for a moment, trying to make herself believe that it was not pretty, that its faded color had taken away its beauty, but she could not. She began to caress its old surface with her long, sensitive fingers. The mask drew her. She felt suddenly close to her Aunt Juliet.

She lifted the mask and slipped it over her face. Yes, it was beautiful; her intuition had not lied. Her eyes looked sinister through the thin slits provided for them, and the lower part of the mask pressed unpleasantly upon her mouth.

A sound from beyond the room made her take the mask quickly from her face and drop it into the bottom drawer of her bureau. Much against her desire, she decided that the mask would have to go back to the closed room that night.

When Monica awoke in the night, she lay still for a moment, collecting her thoughts and making sure that the house was quiet. Presently she got up, careful not to make a sound, and saw by her watch that it was long after midnight. Then she lit the bed-lamp and went to the bureau to get the mask. She had got almost to the door of her room with it when she thought that perhaps she had better take a glass, so that if someone awoke, she could say she had been going to the bathroom for a glass of water.

She opened the door softly and looked cautiously into the dimly lit hall. Then she stepped quickly out, leaving her door slightly ajar, and went rapidly down the hall, keeping close to the wall. She groped for the key on the door-frame, found it, and opened the door of the closed room. The light went up, and at once Monica crossed the room and replaced the mask on the hook. In a moment she was out in the hall once more with the door of the closed room locked behind her.

Then she went on to the bathroom, just in case someone should have heard something and should venture to look into the hall. She was glad that she had taken the precaution, for when she emerged from the bathroom with a glass of water in her hand, she saw someone pausing before her slightly open door. That would be Aunt Susan, who had undoubtedly heard and wanted to see that everything was all right. As Monica came down the hall, the older woman pushed open the door and slipped into her room.

Monica felt a great sense of relief that Aunt Susan had not got into the hall a few moments sooner. Then she stepped into her room and stopped abruptly. By the light of the bed-lamp she saw that

the older woman was not in nightclothes; she was fully dressed! In the darkness of the far corners of the room, Monica saw also two vague shadowy shapes regarding her with eyes that seemed to glow greenly in the night. She took a hesitant step forward.

"Aunt Susan," she faltered.

The older woman turned.

Monica stood rooted, the glass of water slipping from her nerveless fingers. She did not hear the crash it made as it broke on the floor. The face that looked at her in the green glow of the bed-lamp, the face that peered evilly at her from the foot of the bed, was the face of her dead Aunt Juliet!

Even as she stared wide-eyed, the face faded into the dark, and the figure crumpled oddly into nothing. The two figures in the background vanished, too. Monica stepped uncertainly forward, putting out a shaking hand to steady herself against the foot of the bed. A door closed somewhere in the house. There were footsteps in the hall, and in a moment Aunt Susan had come into the room and was standing at Monica's side asking, "Is anything the matter? What is it? I declare, your face is white as a sheet!"

Monica shook her head. "It was nothing," she said with an effort. "I felt a little faint, and dropped the glass."

She drew herself together and walked around to the side of the bed, where she sat down.

"Sure you're all right?" asked the older woman.

"Quite sure, Aunt Susan. I'm sorry I disturbed you."

Monica drew the covers up around her and lay back against the pillows, hoping she had hidden the wild beating of her heart. The older woman looked at her hesitantly for a moment, standing white and apprehensive in her long nightgown; then she turned and went toward the door.

"Good night, Monica. If anything goes wrong, please call me."

She closed the door behind her.

Monica stared about her into the dimly lit darkness. For a long time she could not bring herself to go to sleep, but at last she slept. She left the bed-lamp burning.

She awoke abruptly after a terrifying dream. She had been alone in a strange, dark building, like an ancient castle, wandering in its damp corridors, lost. Then suddenly there were three malevolent white figures before her, and in a moment she was struggling desperately with something impalpable, something she could not grasp, something that was smothering her. And then in her dream she had seen a great, horrible face bending close to hers, and vague, shadowy arms enfolding her. One of her hands was free, and she tore wildly at the yellow face pressed so close to her own. At last the face had come away in her hands, and she saw that it was half Aunt Juliet's, and half another woman's, and yet it was the satin mask, writhing and alive. It was then that she awoke.

She lay trembling. The dream had frightened her, but little by little her courage came back. The bed-lamp was still on, but she felt oddly weak, and was conscious of some force outside herself directing her. She was aware abruptly of an impelling urge to get the satin mask from its loneliness in that locked room.

Not entirely without reluctance, she got out of bed and stood indecisively on the thick rug. She caught her breath momentarily at the odd weakness that assailed her, but in a few seconds this weakness had passed. The urge to see the mask came on again, overpowering her reluctance.

She went softly out into the hall and

stole along to the door of the closed room. She sought almost feverishly for the key, found it, opened the door, and went blindly into the room. She went directly to the mask, took it from the hook, and slipped quietly from the room, locking the door carefully behind her.

BACK in her room, she held the mask up, looking at it closely. She held it on a level with her eyes, squarely even with her face, and caressed the smooth satin with the fingers of one hand. As she looked through the eye-slits, she fancied that she saw a movement behind. Startled, she lowered the mask; there was nothing there. It was not difficult to convince herself that she had seen the shadow of some movement of her own through the eye-slits.

She noticed uneasily how lustrous the satin mask seemed, and remembered how drab its color had been when she had first seen it. She held it up again, still caressing it, feeling terribly drawn to this beautiful adornment. Then again she saw a movement through the slits, but this time she did not lower the mask. She looked away from the eye-slits, outlining the mask with her gaze. Then she looked back again—and saw that from the dusk behind the mask, two bright, glittering eyes were watching her through the slits in the satin. She sat paralyzed in her bed, continuing to hold the mask before her. Then she saw a movement beneath the eyes, and lowered her gaze. It was the lips, the rich red lips of the yellow satin mask. They were working convulsively, moving, alive!

With a half-strangled cry, Monica thrust the mask under the bed. Then she lay back on the pillow, breathing quickly. Her eyes caught the faintest suggestion of movement at the door of her room. The door was opening slowly, as if it were being pushed. Monica shrank back against the bedstead, her eyes wide in terror. But there was nothing there that Monica could see. Perhaps she had not closed the door, and its weight was now swinging it open. She leaned forward slightly, breathing a little more easily.

Then she heard the faintest rustling movement from the side of the bed, coming as if from behind her. She turned her head quickly. Bending swiftly downward was the dim suggestion of a figure, its spectral face hidden beneath the yellow satin mask, its eyes glowing evilly down upon her, its movement disclosing two other figures peering at her from the darkness beyond. It seemed an eternity that Monica lay there, an eternity that the hideous apparition took to descend. Then the lamp went out. With a choking cry, Monica fainted.

WHEN Monica did not come downstairs the next morning, it was Alice who went up to call her. Aunt Susan had said, "Monica's never been late before. Won't she be jolted to find her record broken!"

Alice found her cousin so weak that she could lift her arm only with great effort. Alice was alarmed.

"What happened, Monica?"

Monica looked at Alice, confused. "I—I don't know, Alice. I'm so weak, I can't get up. It was that dream." She shut her eyes tightly and shuddered.

Sudden terror struck Alice. She came down on her knees beside her cousin's bed. "What did you say? What was that about a dream, Monica?"

Monica seemed not to have heard. "It was bending over me," she murmured. "It was rich and alive, a beautiful yellow—but evil. Then she—she—oh, I don't know what happened, Alice."

"Monica!" exclaimed Alice sharply, her face suddenly pale, "you've found that mask! You've put it on!"

Monica had never seen her cousin so disturbed. "Oh, Alice, I couldn't help it," she said. "I couldn't. It was so beautiful. If it hadn't been for that letter, I'd never have found it."

Alice drew her breath in sharply. Her voice, when next she spoke, was gentler. "I know how beautiful it is, Monica. That's why mother couldn't bring herself to destroy it, even though its destruction would have broken the curse on it."

She became suddenly agitated, and her words tumbled over one another in her hurry to say what preyed on her mind.

"Now you've worn it, and I'm afraid for you, Monica. Aunt Juliet had the same dreams before she died; she got weaker and weaker. That mask, and her visions of the dark woman." She paused suddenly, suspicious. "You haven't had any 'visions', have you?"

Monica nodded. "I'm sorry, Alice, but I've seen Aunt Juliet twice. I tried to believe they were dreams, but I wasn't sleeping."

Alice covered her face with her hands, trying to hide her agitation. "We mustn't let mother know anything about this," she said. "She'll have to know you're ill, but we'll try to cover up these symptoms. You see, mother has a terribly weak heart, and if she thought that —that anything might happen to you, as it did to Aunt Juliet, I'm afraid. . . ."

Monica nodded. "Yes, she mustn't know," she whispered. It was an effort for her to speak, and Alice noticed.

"I'm going to call the doctor now, Monica," she said.

"Yes, but wait. Under the bed—the mask. Put it back into the locked room in case Aunt Susan might go in there. If it weren't there, she'd know."

Alice bent and found the mask; she left the room holding it gingerly in her fingers.

AUNT SUSAN, who felt that the girls were keeping something from her, managed to see the doctor alone after his second visit.

"Tell me, Doctor, what ails my niece?"

The doctor shrugged. "Honestly, Mrs. Fraser, I don't know. I feel she is keeping something from me. Perhaps she has been working too hard."

"My niece does very little work."

"That makes it all the more strange. Something is sapping her strength. However, she is working back to normal again; so there's nothing to worry about."

With that, Aunt Susan had to be content.

Five days later, Monica had what Alice explained to her mother as a "relapse". Monica had had the dream again, and her condition alarmed even the doctor when he came. But because he had been warned by Alice, he did not communicate his alarm to Mrs. Fraser.

To Monica, Alice said, "We can't keep this from mother much longer."

Monica murmured, "I'm sorry. But don't say anything until—until the doctor can tell what will happen."

Alice looked at her cousin in anguish. "Oh, Monica, don't you see? He can't prevent your having dreams, can he? He can't prevent something he can't see." Her voice trembled. "Monica, don't you see?—you're going, like Aunt Juliet."

Monica closed her eyes tightly, pressing her lips together. Her hand and arm outstretched upon the coverlet shuddered violently. "No, no," she whispered harshly, "I'm not . . . I can't . . ."

Alice dropped to her knees. "I'm sorry, Monica," she said.

A WEEK later Alice was awakened in the night by the sound of Monica thrashing wildly about in her bed. She had moved into Monica's room "to watch her," as she had explained to her

mother. She got up hastily and went over to her cousin. She put on the bed-lamp, and abruptly the struggle ceased. Then she caught hold of Monica's wrist, feeling for her pulse; it beat so slowly, so faintly, that Alice ran from the room in alarm to summon the doctor.

She pounded on the doors of her parents' rooms as she passed, waking them. Her mother met her in the hall as she returned from the telephone.

"Whatever's the matter, Alice?"

"Monica," she said. "I think she's—sinking."

The older woman gave a startled gasp and turned to her husband, who had just come up. Alice did not hear what her mother said. She hurried on into the room, where her parents joined her. The doctor, who lived only a few doors away, and who had not yet gone to bed, arrived in a few minutes. Alice let him in.

"How is she?" he asked, as soon as he entered the house.

"Dying, I think."

The doctor murmured deprecatingly and hurried upstairs. He made a rapid examination and tried to be cheerful.

"How is she?" Mrs. Fraser kept asking.

At last he said reluctantly, "I'm afraid she's sinking, but I can't be sure." He shot a stimulant into Monica's arm and turned to the three who were watching him. "If she comes out of that, there's a chance." But his eyes looking at Alice, said, "She'll never come out of that!"

Mrs. Fraser came forward. "But what is it, Doctor? Surely you can tell us what ails her?"

The doctor hesitated. "I hate to admit that I don't know, but I don't. There's something very strange about this case—something that puzzles me very much. That girl's strength leaving her like that is beyond my understanding. Physically she's as sound as can be, except for that. You know," he turned directly to the older woman, "it's almost as if something in the air were draining her life-blood, and if we could get our hands on it, if we could touch it, destroy it, then perhaps——" he ended suddenly.

Aunt Susan had gone abruptly pale.

"There was a case like this in my predecessor's time, I understand," continued the doctor. "A woman, too. Got weaker and weaker until she died."

But Mrs. Fraser waited to hear no more. In a faint voice she moaned, "The mask!" Then she ran from the room, and in a few moments the door of the closed room could be heard opening.

Henry said, "She's gone after that mask, Alice!" His voice was unnaturally harsh.

Alice nodded.

The doctor did not understand. "What is it?" he asked.

There was a sudden, terrifying cry from the adjoining room. Henry made for the door, but before he could reach it, it was thrown open and Mrs. Fraser appeared on the threshold, clinging weakly to the knob with one hand. In the other she held the yellow mask.

"Look," she gasped. "She wore it, she had it on!"

The mask dangled from her hand, swinging slowly from side to side, its sightless eyes like those of a living thing. Gone was its faded color, gone its air of age. It was of a rich, lustrous yellow color, so vital that its red lips seemed to quiver in breathing. And evil hung about it like a sentient cloud.

Wrathfully Henry sprang forward, snatching the mask from his wife's hands. Then he tore it squarely across, and across again. But even as he tore it, he felt other hands than his flailing helplessly in the air about the mask, felt cold frail hands descending from above, and the hovering presence of someone he could not see.

Susan Fraser's eyes widened suddenly, and she shrank fearfully back against the door, one hand clutching at her breast. Abruptly she saw what her husband had not seen. Putting both hands before her face, she called out in a terrible voice, *"Juliet! Juliet!"* Then, with a long wailing sigh, she fell forward.

The doctor sprang away from the bed and caught her in his arms, lowering her gently to the floor. In a moment he looked up; his face was white. Alice stepped quickly forward to be at her father's side. Twice the doctor started to say something, but each time the words failed to come.

"Dead?" asked Alice in a whisper.

The doctor nodded. "It was her heart," he said.

Alice clenched her hands. "It was the mask!" she said. "But it shall not have Monica!"

Then abruptly from the bed where Monica lay, there was a movement. Even as the stricken trio turned, Monica's voice came very faintly.

"Water," she murmured. "Water!"

Horror Insured

By PAUL ERNST

Another amazing story about the exploits of the sinister figure who calls himself Doctor Satan, the world's weirdest criminal—a tale of breath-taking incidents and eery power

1. In Satan's Crucible

IT WAS noon. The enormous National State Building hummed like a beehive with the activity of its tenants. Every office spewed forth men and women on their way to lunch. The express elevators dropped like plummets from the seventy-ninth floor, while the locals handled the crowds from the fortieth floor down.

At the top floor an express elevator tarried beyond its usual schedule. The operator paid no attention to the red flash from the starter downstairs signaling the Up cages to start down as soon as possible. He acted as though he was beyond schedules, as indeed he was.

This elevator, though not entirely private, was at the disposal of Martial Varley, owner of the building, whose offices took up the top floor. Others could ride in it, but they did so with the understanding that at morning, noon and evening the elevator waited to carry Varley, whose appearances at his office occurred with time-clock regularity. Hence, if the cage waited inactively those in it knew why and did not exhibit signs of impatience.

There were half a dozen people in the elevator that paused for Varley to ride down. There was an elderly woman, Varley's office manager and two secretaries; and there were two big business

"He found himself gazing at a shimmering figure that looked like a lizard."

men who had been conferring with Varley and were now waiting to go to lunch with him.

The six chatted in pairs to one another. The cage waited, with the operator humming a tune. Around them, in the big building, the prosaic business of prosaic people was being done. Nothing farther from the abnormal or horrible could be imagined. Yet terror and death were there, in that cage, with the others.

The glass-paneled doors to Varley's office opened. The operator snapped to attention and those in the cage stopped talking and stared respectfully at the man who came to the cage doors.

Varley was a man of sixty, gray-haired, with a coarse but kindly face dominated by a large nose which his enemies called bulbous. He wore the hat that had made him famous—a blue-gray fedora which he ordered in quantity lots and wore exclusive of all other colors, fabrics or fashions.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Ed," Varley boomed to one of the two business men in the cage. "Phone call. Held me up for a few minutes."

He stepped into the elevator, nodding to the others.

"Let's go," he said to the operator.

The cage started down.

The express elevators were supposed to fall like a plummet. They made the long drop to the ground in a matter of seconds, normally. And this one started like a plummet.

"Damn funny, that phone call I got just before I came out of my office," Varley boomed to the two men he was lunching with. "Some joker calling himself Doctor Satan——"

He stopped, and frowned.

"What's wrong with the elevator?" he snapped to the operator.

"I don't know, sir," the boy said.

He was jerking at the lever. Ordinarily, so automatic was the cage, he did not touch the controls from the time the top floor doors mechanically closed themselves till the time the lobby was reached. Now he was twitching the control switch back and forth, from Off to On.

And the elevator was slowing down.

The swift start had slowed to a smooth crawl downward. And the crawl was becoming a creep. The floor numbers, that had flashed on the little frosted glass panel inside the cage as fast as you could count, were now forming themselves with exasperating slowness. Sixty-one, sixty, fifty-nine . . .

"Can't you make it go faster?" said Varley. "I never saw these cages go so slow. Is the power low?"

"I don't think so, sir," said the operator. He jammed the control against the fast-speed peg. And the cage slowed down still more.

"Something's wrong," whispered one of the girl secretaries to the other. "This slow speed. . . . And it's getting warm in here!"

Evidently Varley thought so too. He unbuttoned his vest and took his fedora off and fanned himself.

"I don't know what the hell's the matter," he growled to the two men with him. "Certainly have to have the engineer look into this. There's supposed to be decent ventilation in these shafts. And if they call this express service . . . Gad, I'm hot!"

Perspiration was bursting out on his forehead now. He began to look ghastly pale.

Fifty-two, fifty-one, fifty . . . the little red numbers appeared on the frosted glass indicator ever more slowly. The elevator would take five minutes to descend, at this pace.

"Something's the matter with me," gasped Varley. "I've never felt like this before."

One of the girl secretaries was standing near him. She looked at him suddenly, with wide eyes in which fear of something beyond normal comprehension was beginning to show. She shrank back from him.

"Get this cage down," Varley panted. "I'm—sick."

The rest looked at each other. All were beginning to feel what the girl, who had been nearest him, had felt.

Heat was beginning to radiate from Varley's corpulent body as if he were a stove!

"Good heavens, man!" said one of the two business men. He laid his hand on Varley's arm, took it away quickly. "Why —you're burning up with fever. What's wrong?"

Varley tried to answer, but couldn't. He staggered back against the wall of the cage, leaned there with arms hanging down and lips hanging slack. There was

no longer perspiration on his face. It was dry, feverishly dry; and the skin was cracking on his taut, puffed cheeks.

"Burning!" he gasped. "Burning up!"

The girl secretary screamed, then. And the man who had put his hand on Varley's arm jerked at the operator's shoulder.

"For heaven's sake get this cage down! Mr. Varley's ill!"

"I—I can't," gasped the boy. "Something's the matter—it never acted like this before——"

He jerked at the controls, and the elevator did not respond. Slowly, monotonously, it continued its deliberate descent.

And abruptly a scream tore from Varley's cracking lips.

"Burning! Help me, somebody——"

The slowly dropping cage became a thing of horror, a six-foot square of hell from which there was no escape because there were no doors opening onto the shaft at the upper levels, and which could not be speeded up because it did not respond to the controls.

Screaming with every breath he drew, Varley sank to the floor. And those who might otherwise have tried to help him cowered away from him as far as they could get. For from his body now was radiating heat that made a tiny inferno of the elevator.

"God!" whispered one of the men. "Look at him—he really *is* burning up!"

The heat from Varley's body had become so intense that the others in the cage could hardly stand it. But far worse than their bodily torment was the mental agony of watching the thing that for a week had New York City in a chaos.

Varley had stopped screaming now. He lay staring up at the gilded roof of the elevator with frightful, glazing eyes. His chest heaved with efforts to draw breath. Heaved, then was still.

"He's dead!" shrieked one of the secretaries. "Dead——"

Her body fell to the floor of the cage near Varley's. The elderly woman quietly sagged to her knees, then in a huddled heap in the corner as her senses fled under the impact of a shock too great to be endured.

But the horror that had gripped Varley went on.

"Look! Look! Look!" panted the office manager.

But he had no need to pant out the word. The rest were looking all right. They'd have turned their eyes away if they could, but there is a fascination to extremes of horror that makes the will powerless. In every detail they were forced to see the thing that happened.

Varley's dead body was beginning to disappear.

The corpulent form of the man who a moment ago had been one of the biggest figures in the nation seemed to have been turned to wax, which was melting and vaporizing.

His face was a shapeless mass now; and the flesh of his body seemed to be melting and running together. As it did so, his limbs writhed and twitched as if still imbued with life. Writhed, and shriveled.

"Burning up!" whispered the office manager, his eyes bulging with horror behind their thick lenses. *"Melting away . . . burning up. . . ."*

It was so incredible, so unreal that it was dream-like.

The cage descended slowly, slowly, like the march of time itself which no man could hasten. The operator stood like a wooden image at the controls, staring with starting eyes at the heap on the floor which had been Varley. The two business men shrank together, hands to their mouths, gnawing the backs of their hands. The office manager was panting,

"Look . . . look . . . look . . ." with every breath, like a sobbing groan.

And Varley was a diminishing, shapeless mass on the floor.

"Oh, God, let me out of here!" screamed one of the business men.

But there was no way out. No doors opened onto the shaft here. All in the cage were doomed to stay and watch the spectacle that would haunt them till they died.

On the cage floor there was a blue-gray fedora hat, and a mound of blackened substance that was almost small enough to have been contained in it.

Twenty-nine, twenty-eight, twenty-seven. . . . The cage descended with its horrible, unchangeable slowness.

Twenty-five, twenty-four . . .

On the floor was Varley's hat. That was all.

The operator was last to go. Eleven, ten, the red numerals on the frosted glass panel read. Then his inert body joined the senseless forms of the others on the floor.

The cage hit the lobby level. Smoothly, marvelous mechanisms devised by man's ingenuity, the doors opened by themselves; opened, and revealed seven fainting figures—around a gray-blue fedora hat.

THREE o'clock.

On the stage of the city's leading theater, the show, *Burn Me Down,* was in the middle of the first act of its matinee performance.

The show was a musical comedy, built around a famous comedian. His songs and dances and patter carried it. To see him, and him alone, the crowds came. Worth millions, shrewd, and at the same time as common as the least who saw him from the galleries, he was the idol of the stage.

He sat on a stool in the wings now, chin on fist, moodily watching the revue dance of twenty bare-legged girls billed as the world's most beautiful. His heavy black eyebrows were down in a straight line over eyes like ink-spots behind comedy horn-rimmed glasses. His slight, lithe body was tense.

"Your cue in a minute, Mr. Croy," warned the manager.

"Hell, don't you suppose I know it?" snapped the comedian.

Then his scowl disappeared for a moment. "Sorry."

The manager stared. Croy's good humor and even temper were proverbial in the theater. No one had ever seen him act like this before.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Yeah, I don't feel so hot," said Croy, scowling again. "Rather, I feel *too* hot! Like I was burning up with a fever or something."

He passed a handkerchief over his forehead.

"And I feel like trouble's coming," he added. He took a rabbit's foot from his vest pocket and squeezed it. "Heavy trouble."

The manager bit his lip. Croy was the hit of the show—*was* the show.

"Knock off for the afternoon if you feel bad," he advised. "We'll have Charley do your stuff. We can get away with it at a matinee——"

"And have the mob on your neck," interrupted Croy, without false modesty. "It's me they come to see. I'll go on with it, and have a rest afterward. . . ."

The twenty girls swept forward in a last pirouette and danced toward the wings. Croy stood up.

"It must be a fever," he muttered, mopping at his face again. "Never felt like this before, though."

The stage door attendant burst into the wings and ran toward the manager. The manager started to reprimand him

for leaving his post, then saw the afternoon newspaper he was waving.

He took it from the man's hand, glanced at the headlines.

"What!" he gasped. "A man burn up? They're crazy! How could a . . . Varley—biggest man in the city! . . ."

He started toward the comedian.

"My God, could it be the same thing happening here? . . . *Croy! Croy—wait——*"

But the famous comedian was already on the stage, catapulting to the center of it in the ludicrous stumble, barely escaping a fall, that was his specialty.

The manager, clutching the newspaper, stood in the wings with death-white face, and watched.

Croy went into a dance to the rhythm of the theme song of the show. He was terribly pale, and the manager saw him stagger over a difficult step. Then his voice rose with the words of the song:

"Burn me down, baby. Don't say maybe. Put your lips against my lips—*and burn me down!*"

THE audience half rose. Croy had fallen to his knees on a dance turn. The manager saw that the perspiration that had dewed his forehead no longer showed. His skin looked dry, cracked.

Croy got up. The audience settled back again, wondering if the fall had been part of his act. Croy resumed his steps and his singing. But his voice was barely audible beyond the fifth row:

"Burn me down, Sadie. Oh-h-h, lady! Look into my eyes and *burn me*——"

Croy stopped. His words ended in a wild high note.

Then he screamed almost like a woman and his hands went to his throat. They tore at his collar and tie.

"Burning!" he screamed. *"Burning——"*

The manager leaned, shaking, against a pillar. The newspaper, with the account in it of what had happened to Varley, rattled to the floor.

It was the same! The same awful thing was happening to Croy!

"Curtain!" he croaked. "Ring down the curtain!"

Now the audience was standing up, some of them indeed climbing to their seats to see what was happening on the stage.

Croy was prone on the boards, writhing, shrieking. The canvas backdrop billowed a little with the heat coming from his body.

"Curtain!" roared the manager. "For God's sake—are you deaf?"

The curtain dropped. Croy's convulsed body was hidden from the sight of the audience. With the curtain's fall, he stopped screaming. It was as though the thing had sliced through the sound like a great descending guillotine. But it was not the curtain that had killed the sound.

Croy was dead. His limbs still jerked and writhed. But it was not the movement of life. It was the movement of a twisted roll of paper that writhes and jerks as it is consumed in flame.

The manager drew a deep breath. Then, with his knees trembling, he walked out onto the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, trying to make his voice sound out over the pandemonium that ruled over the theater. "Mr. Croy has had a heart attack. The show will not go on. You may get your money at the box-office on the way out."

He fairly ran from the stage and back of the curtain, where terrified girls and men were clumped around Croy's body—or what was left of it.

Heart attack! The manager's mouth distorted over that description.

Croy's body had shrunk—or, rather, *melted*—to half its normal size. His features were indistinguishable, like the features of a wax head with a fire under it. His clothes were smoldering. The heat was such that it was hard to stand within a yard of him.

The big, horn-rimmed glasses slid from his face. His body diminished, diminished. . . .

A stage hand came racing back. Behind him trotted a plump man in black with rimless spectacles over his eyes.

"I got a doctor," the stage hand gasped. "From the audience."

He stopped. And the doctor stared at the place where Croy had lain, and then gazed around at the faces of the others.

"Well?" he said. "Where is Croy? I was told he was dangerously ill."

No one answered. One after another stared back into his face with the eyes of maniacs.

"Where is he, I say?" snapped the doctor. "I was told——"

He stopped, aware at last that something far worse than ordinary illness was afoot back here.

The manager's lips moved. Words finally came.

"Croy is—*was*—there."

His pointing finger leveled tremulously at a spot on the stage. Then he fell, pitching forward on his face like a dead man.

And the point on the stage he had designated was empty. Only a blackened patch was there, with a little smoke drifting up from it. A blackened patch—with a pair of comedy horn-rimmed glasses beside it.

2. *Lucifex Insurance Co.*

In the elevator control room of the Northern State Building, a man in the coveralls of an electrician bent over the great switchboard. He was examining the automatic control switch of the elevator in which Varley had ridden down from his top-floor office for the last time in life; had ridden down—but never reached the bottom!

Grease smeared the man's face and hands. But an especially keen observer would have noted several things about the seeming electrician that did not match his profession.

He would have noticed that the man's body was as lithe and muscular as that of a dancer; that his hands were only superficially smeared with grease, and were without calluses; that his fingers were the long, steely strong ones of a great surgeon or musician. Then, if he were one of the very few in New York capable of making the identity, he might have gone further and glanced into the man's steely eyes under coal-black eyebrows, and stared at his patrician nose and strong chin and firm, large mouth—and have named him as Ascott Keane.

The building manager stood beside Keane. He had treated Keane as an ordinary electrician while the building engineer was near by. Now he gave him the deference due one of the greatest criminal investigators of all time.

"Well, Mr. Keane?" he said.

"It's about as I thought," Keane said. "A device on the order of a big rheostat was placed on the switch circuit. In that way the descent of the elevator could be slowed as much as the person manipulating the switch desired."

"But why was the elevator Mr. Varley rode down in made to go slower? Did the slowness have anything to do with his death?"

"No. It had to do only with the spectacle of his death!" Keane's face was very grim. His jaw was a hard square. "The man who killed Varley wanted to

be sure that his death, and dissolution, were witnessed lingeringly and unmistakably, so that the full terror of it could be brought out."

He straightened up, walked toward the door. "You've set an office aside for me?"

"Yes. It's next to my own on the sixtieth floor. But you aren't going to it yet, are you?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Well, there might be fingerprints. Whoever tampered with the control board might not have been careful about clues."

A mirthless smile appeared on Keane's firm lips.

"Fingerprints! My dear sir! You don't know Doctor Satan, I'm afraid."

"Doctor Sat——"

The building manager clenched his hands excitedly. "Then you already know about the phone call to Mr. Varley just before he died."

"No," said Keane, "I don't."

"But you named the man who called——"

"Only because I know who did this—have known since I first heard of it. Not from any proofs I've found or will ever find. Tell me about the phone call."

"There isn't much. I'd hardly thought of it till you spoke of a Doctor Satan. . . . Varley was leaving his office for lunch when his telephone rang. I was in his office about a lease and I couldn't help hearing a little of it—his words, that is. I gathered that somebody calling himself Doctor Satan was talking to Varley about insurance."

"Insurance!"

"Yes. Though what a physician should be doing selling insurance, I couldn't say——"

"Doctor Satan is not exactly a physician," Keane interrupted dryly. "Go on."

"That's all there is to tell. The man at the other end of the wire calling himself Doctor Satan seemed to want to insist that Varley take out some sort of insurance, till finally Varley just hung up on him. He turned to me and said something about being called by cranks and nuts, and went out to the elevator."

Keane walked from the control room, with the building manager beside him. He went to the elevator shafts.

"Sixty," he said to the operator.

In the elevator, he became the humble workman again. The manager treated him as such. "When you're through with the faulty wiring in sixty, come to my office," he said.

Keane nodded respectfully, then got out at the sixtieth floor.

A suite of two large offices had been set aside for him. There was a door through a regular anteroom, and a smaller, private entrance leading directly into the rear of the two offices.

KEANE went through the private entrance. A girl, seated beside a flat-topped desk, got up. She was tall, quietly lovely, with dark blue eyes and copper-brown hair. This was Beatrice Dale, Keane's more-than-secretary.

"Visitors?" said Keane, as she handed a calling-card to him.

She nodded. "Walter P. Kessler, one of the six you listed as most likely to receive Doctor Satan's first attentions in this new scheme of his."

Keane was running a towel over his face, taking off the grease—which was not grease but dark-colored soap. He took off the electrician's coveralls, emerging in a perfectly tailored blue serge suit complete save for his coat. The coat he took from a closet, shrugging into it as he approached the desk and sat down.

"What did you find out, Ascott?" said Beatrice.

new form: If you do not choose to take out my horror insurance, you shall burn in slow fire till you are utterly consumed. It may be next month or next year. It may be tomorrow. It may be in the privacy of your room, or among crowds. Read in this afternoon's paper of what will shortly happen to two of the town's leading citizens. Then decide whether or not the premium payment asked is not a small price to pay for allaying the horror the reading of their fates will inspire in you.

Signed, DOCTOR SATAN.

Keane tapped the letter against his palm.

"Horror insurance," he murmured. "I can see Doctor Satan's devilish smile as he coined that phrase. I can hear his chuckle as he 'invites' you to take out a 'policy'. Well, are you going to pay it?"

Kessler's shudder rattled the chair he sat in.

"Certainly! Am I mad, that I should refuse to pay—after reading what happened to Varley and Croy? Burned alive! Reduced to a shapeless little residue of consumed flesh—and then to nothingness! Certainly I'll pay!"

"Then why did you come to me?"

"To see if we couldn't outwit this Doctor Satan in future moves. What's to keep him from demanding a sum like that every year as the price of my safety? Or every month, for that matter?"

"Nothing," said Keane.

Kessler's hand clenched the chair-arm. "That's it. I'll have to pay this one, because I daren't defy the man till some sort of scheme is set in motion against him. But I want you to track him down before another demand is presented. I'll give you a million dollars if you succeed. Two million. . . ."

The look on Keane's face stopped him.

"My friend," said Keane, "I'd double your two million, personally, if I could step out and destroy this man, now, before he does more horrible things."

He stood up.

"How were you instructed to pay the 'premium'?"

For a moment Kessler looked less panic-stricken. A flash of the grim will that had enabled him to build up his great fortune showed in his face.

"I was instructed to pay it in a way that may trip our Doctor Satan up," he said. "I am to write ten checks of seventy-five thousand dollars each, payable to the Lucifex Insurance Company. These checks I am to bring to this building tonight. From the north side of the building I will find a silver skull dangling from a wire leading down the building wall. I am to put the checks in the skull. It will be drawn up and the checks taken by someone in some room up in the building."

His jaw squared.

"That ought to be our chance, Keane! We can have men scattered throughout the National State Building——"

Keane shook his head.

"In the first place, you'd have to have an army here. There are seventy-nine floors, Kessler. Satan's man may be in any room on any of the seventy-nine floors on the north side of the building. Or he may be on the roof. In the second place, expecting to catch a criminal like Doctor Satan in so obvious a manner is like expecting to catch a fox in a butterfly net. He probably won't be within miles of this building tonight. And you can depend on it that his man, who is to draw up the skull with the checks in it, won't be in any position where he can be caught by the police or private detectives."

Kessler's panic returned in full force. He clawed at Keane's arm.

"What can we do, then?" he babbled. "What can we do?"

"I don't know, yet," admitted Keane. "But we've got till tonight to figure out a plan. You come to the building as instructed, with the checks to put in the

skull. By then I'll have weapons with which to fight"—his lips twisted—"the Lucifex Insurance Company."

3. Stroke and Counterstroke

THE National State Building is situated on a slanting plot in New York City. The first floor on the lower side is like a cavern—dark, with practically no light coming in the windows from the canyon of a street.

Near the center of that side was an unobtrusive small shop with "Lucian Photographic Supplies" lettered on it. The window was clean-looking, yet it was strangely opaque. Had a person looked at it observantly he would have noticed, with some bewilderment, that while nothing seemed to obstruct vision, he still could not see what was going on behind it. But there are few really observant eyes; and in any event there was nothing about the obscure place to attract attention.

At the back of the shop there was a large room completely sealed against light. On the door was the sign, "Developing Room."

Inside the light-proof room the only illumination came from two red light bulbs, like and yet strangely unlike the lights used in developing-rooms. But the activities in the room had nothing to do with developing pictures!

In one corner were two figures that seemed to have stepped out of a nightmare. One was a monkey-like little man with a hair-covered face from which glinted bright, cruel eyes. The other was a legless giant who swung his great torso, when he moved, on arms as thick as most men's thighs. Both were watching a third figure in the room, more bizarre than either of them.

The third figure bent over a bench. It was tall, spare, and draped from throat to ankles in a blood-red robe. Red rubber gloves were drawn over its hands. The face was covered by a red mask which concealed every feature save the eyes—which were like black, live coals peering through the eye-holes. A skull-cap fitted tightly over the head; and from this, in sardonic imitation of the fiend he pretended to be, were two projections like horns.

Doctor Satan stared broodingly at the things on the bench which were engaging his attention. These, innocent enough in appearance, still had in them somehow a suggestion of something weird and grotesque.

They were little dolls, about eight inches high. The sheen of their astonishingly life-like faces suggested that they were made of wax. And they were so amazingly well sculptured that a glimpse revealed their likeness to living persons.

There were four of the little figures clad like men. And any reporter or other person acquainted with the city's outstanding personalities would have recognized them as four of the nation's business titans. One of them was Walter P. Kessler.

Doctor Satan's red-gloved hand pulled a drawer open in the top of the bench. The supple fingers reached into the drawer, took from it two objects, and placed them on the bench.

And now there were six dolls on the bench, the last two being a man and a woman.

The male doll was clad in a tiny blue serge suit. Its face was long-jawed, with gray chips for eyes, over which were heavy black brows. An image of Ascott Keane.

The female doll was a likeness of a beautiful girl with coppery brown hair and deep blue eyes. Beatrice Dale.

Her face was pale, but her voice was calm, controlled. She had worked with Keane long enough to know how to face the horrors devised by Doctor Satan calmly, if not fearlessly.

"From the control room?" said Keane. "Nothing. The elevator was slowed simply to make the tragic end of Varley more spectacular. And there is Doctor Satan's autograph! The spectacular! All of his plans are marked by it."

"But you found out nothing of the nature of his plans?"

"I got a hint. It's an insurance project."

"Insurance!"

Keane smiled. There was no humor in the smile. There had been no humor in his smiles—or in his soul—since he had first met Doctor Satan, and there would be none till finally, somehow, he overcame the diabolical person who, already wealthy beyond the hopes of the average man, was amusing himself by gathering more wealth in a series of crimes as weird as they were inhuman.

"Yes, insurance. Send in Kessler, Beatrice."

The girl bit her lip. Keane had told her nothing. And the fact that she was burning to know what scraps of information he had picked up showed in her face. But she turned obediently and went to the door leading into the front office.

She came back in a moment with a man who was so anxious to get in that he almost trod on her heels. The man, Walter P. Kessler, was twisting a felt hat to ruins in his desperate fingers; and his brown eyes were like the eyes of a horrified animal as he strode toward Keane's desk.

"Keane!" He paused, looked at the girl, gazed around the office. "I still can't quite understand this. I've known you for years as a rich man's son who never worked in his life and knew nothing but polo and first editions. Now they tell me you are the only man in the world who can help me in my trouble."

"If your trouble has to do with Doctor Satan—and of course it has—I may be able to help," said Keane. "As for the polo and first editions—it is helpful in my hobby of criminology to be known as an idler. You will be asked to keep my real activities hidden."

"Of course," gasped Kessler. "And if ever I can do anything for you in return for your help now——"

Keane waved his hand. "Tell me about the insurance proposition," he said.

"Are you a mind-reader?" exclaimed Kessler.

"No. There's no time to explain. Go ahead."

Kessler dug into his inside coat pocket.

"It's about insurance, all right. And it's sponsored by a man who calls himself Doctor Satan. Though how you knew——"

He handed a long envelope to Keane. "This came in this morning's mail," he said. "Of course I paid no attention to it. Not *then!* In fact, I threw it in my waste basket. I only fished it out again after reading the early afternoon papers—and finding out what happened to poor old Varley——"

He choked, and stopped. Keane read the folded paper in the long business envelope:

Mr. Kessler: You are privileged, among a few others in New York City, to be among the first to be invited to participate in a new type of insurance plan recently organized by me. The insurance will be taken out against an emotion, instead of a tangible menace. That emotion is horror. In a word, I propose to insure you against feeling horror. The premium for this benevolent insurance is seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. If the premium is not paid, you will be subjected to a rather unpleasant feeling of horror concerning something that may happen to you. That something is death, but death in a

"Girse," Doctor Satan's harsh, arrogant voice rasped out.

The monkey-like small man with the hairy face hopped forward.

"The plate," said Doctor Satan.

Girse brought him a thick iron plate, which Doctor Satan set upon the bench.

On the plate were two small, dark patches; discolorations obviously made by the heat of something being burned there. The two little discolorations were all that was left of two little dolls that had been molded in the image of Martial Varley, and the comedian, Croy.

Doctor Satan placed the two dolls on the plate that he had taken from the drawer: the likenesses of Beatrice Dale and Ascott Keane.

"Kessler went to Keane," Doctor Satan rasped, the red mask over his face stirring angrily. "We shall tend to Kessler—after he has paid tonight. We shall not wait that long to care for Keane and the girl."

Two wires trailed over the bench from a wall socket. His red-gloved fingers twisted the wires to terminals set into the iron plate. The plate began to heat up.

"Keane has proved himself an unexpectedly competent adversary," Satan's voice droned out, "with knowledge I thought no man on earth save myself possessed. We'll see if he can escape *this* fate—and avoid becoming, with his precious secretary, as Varley and Croy became."

Small waves of heat began to shimmer up from the iron plate. It stirred the garments clothing the two little dolls. Doctor Satan's glittering eyes burned down on the mannikins. Girse and the legless giant, Bostiff, watched as he did. . . .

FIFTY-NINE stories above the pseudo-developing shop, Keane smiled soberly at Beatrice Dale.

"I ought to fire you," he said.

"Why on earth——" she gasped.

"Because you're such a valuable right-hand man, and because you're such a fine person."

"Oh," Beatrice murmured. "I see. More fears for my safety?"

"More fears for your safety," nodded Keane. "Doctor Satan is out for your life as well as mine, my dear. And——"

"We've had this out many times before," Beatrice interrupted. "And the answer is still: No. I refuse to be fired, Ascott. Sorry."

There was a glint in Keane's steel-gray eyes that had nothing to do with business. But he didn't express his emotions. Beatrice watched his lips part with a breathless stirring in her heart. She had been waiting for some such expression for a long time.

But Keane only said: "So be it. You're a brave person. I oughtn't to allow you to risk your life in this private, deadly war that no one knows about but us. But I can't seem to make you desert, so——"

"So that's that," said Beatrice crisply. "Have you decided how you'll move against Doctor Satan tonight?"

Keane nodded. "I made my plans when I first located him."

"You know where he is?" said Beatrice in amazement.

"I do."

"How did you find it out?"

"I didn't. I thought it out. Doctor Satan seems to have ways of knowing where I am. He must know I've located here in the National State Building. The obvious thing for him to do would be to conceal himself on the other side of town. So, that being the expected thing, what would a person as clever as he is, do?"

Beatrice nodded. "I see. Of course! He'd be——"

"Right here in this building."

"But you told Kessler he was probably miles away!" said Beatrice.

"I did. Because I knew Kessler's character. If he knew the man who threatened him was in the building, he'd try to do something like organizing a raid. Fancy a police raid against Doctor Satan! So I lied and said he was probably a long distance off." Keane sighed. "I'm afraid the lie was valueless. I can foretell pretty precisely what Kessler will do. He will have an army of men scattered through the building tonight, in spite of what I said. He will attempt to trace Doctor Satan through collection of the checks—and he will die."

Beatrice shuddered. "By burning? What a horrible way to——"

She stopped.

"What is it?" said Keane urgently, at the strained expression that suddenly molded her face.

"Nothing, I guess," replied Beatrice slowly. "Power of suggestion, I suppose. When I said 'burning' I seemed to feel hot all over, myself."

Keane sprang from his chair.

"My God—why didn't you tell me at once! I——"

He stopped too, and his eyes narrowed to steely slits in his rugged face. Perspiration was studding his own forehead now.

"It's come!" he said. "The attack on us by Satan. But it wasn't wholly unexpected. The suitcase in the corner—get it and open it! Quickly!"

Beatrice started toward the suitcase, but stopped and pressed her hands to her cheeks. "Ascott—I'm . . . burning up. . . . I——"

"Get that suitcase!"

KEANE sprang to the desk and opened the wide lower drawer. He took a paper-wrapped parcel from it, ripped it open. An odd array was disclosed: two pairs of things like cloth slippers, two pairs of badly proportioned gloves, two small rounded sacks.

Beatrice was struggling with the snaps on the suitcase. Both were breathing heavily now, dragging their arms as if they weighed tons.

"Ascott—I can't stand it—I'm burning——" panted the girl.

"You've got to stand it! Is the case open? Put on the smaller of the two garments there. Toss me the other."

The garments in question were two suits of unguessable material that were designed to fit tightly over a human body—an unclothed human body.

Beatrice tossed the larger of the two to Keane, who was divesting himself of his outer garments with rapid fingers.

"Ascott—I can't change into *this*—here before——"

"Damn modesty!" grated Keane. "Get into those things! You hear! Quickly!"

Both were no longer perspiring. Their faces were dry, feverish. Heat was radiating from their bodies in a stifling stream.

Beatrice stood before Keane in the tight single garment that covered body and arms and legs.

"These gloves on your hands!" snapped Keane. "The sack over your head. The shoes on your feet!"

"Oh, God!" panted Beatrice.

Then she had done as Keane commanded. From soles to hair she was covered by the curious fabric Keane had devised. And the awful burning sensation was allayed.

There were eye-slits in the sacks each wore. They stared at each other with eyes that were wide with a close view of death. Then Beatrice sighed shudderingly.

"The same thing Varley and Croy went through?" she said.

"The same," said Keane. "Poor fel-

lows! And Doctor Satan thought he could deal us the same doom. And he almost did! If we'd been a little farther away from these fabric shields of ours——"

"How do they stop Doctor Satan's weapon?" said Beatrice. "And how can he strike—as he does—from a distance?"

"His weapon, and this fabric I made," said Keane, "go back a long way beyond history, to the priesthood serving the ancestors of the Cretans. They forged the weapon in wizardry, and at the same time devised the fabric to wear as protection against their enemies who must inevitably learn the secret of the weapon too. It is the father of the modern voodoo practise of making a crude image of an enemy and sticking pins into it."

He drew a long breath.

"A small image is made in the likeness of the person to be destroyed. The image is made of substance pervious to fire. In the cases of Croy and Varley, I should say after descriptions of how they perished, of wax. The image is then burned, and the person in whose likeness it is cast burns to nothingness as the image does—*if* the manipulator knows the secret incantations of the Cretans, as Doctor Satan does. But I'll give you more than an explanation; I'll give you a demonstration! For we are going to strike back at Doctor Satan in a manner I think he will be utterly unprepared for!"

He went to the opened suitcase, looking like a being from another planet in the ill-fitting garments he had thrown together after analyzing Varley's death. He took from the suitcase a thing that looked like a little doll. It was an image of a monkey-like man with a hairy face and long, simian arms.

"How hideous!" exclaimed Beatrice.

"Not as hideous externally as internally," said Keane. "This is a likeness of a creature named Girse, one of Satan's followers, who is only prevented from being as fiendish as Satan by lack of genius for it. I wish it were the image of Satan himself. But that would be useless. Satan, using the ancient death, would be prepared for it himself."

"It's made of wax?" said Beatrice, understanding and awe beginning to glint in her eyes.

"Made of wax," Keane nodded.

He looked around the office, saw no metal tray to put the little doll on, and flipped back a corner of the rug. The floor of the office was of smooth cement. He set the image on the cement. With her hand to her breast, Beatrice watched. The proceeding, seeming inconsequential in itself, had an air of deadliness about it that stopped the breath in her throat.

Keane looked around the office again, then strode to the clothes he and Beatrice had flung to the floor in their haste a moment ago.

"Sorry," he said, taking her garments with his own and piling them on the cement. "We'll have to send down to Fifth Avenue for more clothes to be brought here. I need these now."

On the pile of cloth he placed the image of Girse. Then he touched a match to the fabric. . . .

In the developing-room, Doctor Satan fairly spat his rage as he stared at the two wax dolls on the red-hot iron plate. The dolls were not burning! Defying all the laws of physics and, as far as Satan knew, of wizardry, the waxen images were standing unharmed on the metal that should have consumed them utterly.

"Damn him!" Doctor Satan rasped, gloved hands clenching. "Damn him! He has escaped again! Though how——"

He heard breathing begin to sound stertorously beside him. His eyes suddenly widened with incredulity behind the eye-holes in his mask. He whirled.

Girse was staring at him with frenzy and horror in his cruel little eyes. The breath was tearing from his corded throat as though each would be his last.

"Master!" he gasped imploringly. "Doctor Satan! Stop——"

The skin on his face and hands, dry and feverish-looking, suddenly began to crack.

"Stop the burning!" he pleaded in a shrill scream.

But Doctor Satan could only clench his hands and curse, raspingly, impotently. He had never dreamed of such a possibility, was utterly unprepared for it.

Girse shrieked again, and fell to the floor. Then his screams stopped. He was dead. But his body moved on, jerking and twisting as a tight-rolled bit of paper twists and jerks in consuming fire. . . .

"Keane!" whispered Doctor Satan, staring at the floor where a discolored spot was all that remained of his follower. His eyes were frightful. "By the devil, my master, he'll pay for that a thousand times over!"

4. *The Screaming Three*

AT HALF-PAST twelve that night a solitary figure walked along the north side of the National State Building. The north side was the one the Lucian Photographic Supplies shop faced on; the side street. It was deserted save for the lone man.

The man slowed his pace as he saw a shining object hanging from the building wall about waist-high, a few yards ahead of him. He clenched his hands, then took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

The man was Walter P. Kessler. And the flourish of the white handkerchief in the dimness of the street was a signal.

Across the street, four floors up in a warehouse, a man with a private detective's badge in his pocket put a pair of binoculars to his eyes. He watched Kessler, saw the shining object he was approaching, and nodded.

Kessler drew from his pocket an unaddressed envelope. In it were ten checks made out to the Lucifex Insurance Company. He grasped the receptacle for the checks in his left hand.

The receptacle was a cleverly molded skull, of silver, about two-thirds life size. There was a hole in the top of it. Kessler thrust the envelope securely into the hole.

The skull began to rise up the building wall, toward some unguessable spot in the tremendous cliff formed by seventy-nine stories of cut stone. Across the street the man with the binoculars managed at last to spot the thin wire from which the silver skull was suspended. He followed it up with his gaze.

It came from a window almost at the top of the building. The man grasped a phone at his elbow.

He did not dial operator. The phone had a direct line to the building across the way. He simply picked up the receiver and said softly: "Seventy-second floor, eighteenth window from the east wall. *Hop it!*"

In the National State Building a man at an improvised switchboard on the ground floor turned to another. "Seventy-second floor, eighteenth window from the east. Get everybody."

The second man ran toward the night elevator. He went from floor to floor. At each floor he opened the door and signaled. And on each floor two men, who had been watching the corridors along the north side, ran silently toward the other local elevators, which had shaft doors on every floor all the way up to the top. At the same time a third man, at the stairs, drew his gun as he prepared to guard more carefully yet the staircase,

rarely used, threading up beside the shafts.

And on the ground floor within fifty yards of the man at the switchboard, a chuckle came from the masked lips of a red-robed figure who stood straight and tall in a red-lit room.

Across the street the man with the binoculars suddenly picked up the phone again.

"Damn it—they tricked us. Somebody took the money in on the sixty-third floor!"

Changed orders vibrated through the great building. And the red-robed figure in the room at the heart of the maze chuckled again—and moved toward the bench.

Doctor Satan picked up one of the dolls remaining there. It was the image of Kessler. He placed it on the iron plate, which was already heated by the wires trailing from the socket. He watched the little doll broodingly.

It writhed and twisted as the heat melted its wax feet. It fell to the plate. And from the street, far away, sounded a horrible scream.

Doctor Satan's head jerked back as if the shriek were music to his ears. Then, once more, his hissing chuckle sounded out.

"For disobeying commands, my friend," he muttered. "But I knew you'd be obstinate enough to try it——"

He stopped. For a second he stood as rigid as a statue swathed in red. Then, slowly, he turned; and in his coal-black, blazing eyes was fury—and fear.

THERE was an inner door to the developing-room. But the door was locked, and it still stood locked. It had not been touched. Neither had the outer door. Yet in that room with the red-robed figure was another figure now. That of Ascott Keane.

He stood as rigid as Doctor Satan himself, and stared at his adversary out of steel-gray, level eyes.

"It seems we are alone," Keane said slowly. "Bostiff, I suppose, is retrieving the money from Kessler. And Girse? Where is he?"

Doctor Satan's snarl was the only answer. He moved toward Keane, red-swathed hands clenching as he came. Keane stood his ground. Satan stopped.

"How——" he grated.

"Surely *you* do not need to ask that," said Keane. "You must have penetrated the secret of transferring substance, including your own, from one place to another by sheer power of thought."

"I have not!" rasped Doctor Satan. "Nor have you!"

Keane shrugged. "I am here."

"You discovered my hiding-place and hid here while I was out, a short time ago!"

Keane's smile was a deadly thing. "Perhaps I did. Perhaps not. You can provide your own answer. The only thing of importance is that I *am* here——"

"And shall stay here!" Doctor Satan's harsh voice rang out. The fear was fading from his eyes and leaving only fury there. "You have interfered in my plans once too often, Keane!"

As he spoke he raised his right hand with the thumb and forefinger forming an odd, eery angle.

" 'Out of the everywhere into the here,' " he quoted softly. "I have servants more powerful than Girse, whom you destroyed, Ascott Keane. One comes now *—to your own destruction!"*

As he spoke, a strange tensity seized the air of the dim room. Keane paled a little at the blaze in the coal-black eyes. Then he stared suddenly at a spot in thin air to Doctor Satan's right.

Something was happening there. The air was shimmering as though it danced

over an open fire. It wavered, grew misty, swayed in a sinuous column.

" 'Out of the everywhere into the here.' " Doctor Satan's voice was harsh with final triumph. "The old legends had a basis, Keane. The tales of dragons. . . . There was such a thing, *is* such a thing. Only the creations the ancients called dragons do not ordinarily roam the earth in visible form."

The sinuous misty column at the right of the red-robed form was materializing into a thing to stagger a man's reason.

Keane found himself gazing at a shimmering figure that looked like a great lizard, save that it was larger than any lizard, and had smaller legs. It was almost like a snake with legs, but it was a snake two feet through at its thickest part, and only about fourteen feet long, which is not typical serpentine proportion. There were vestigial stubs of wings spreading from its trunk about a yard back of its great, triangular head; and it had eyes such as no true lizard ever had —eight inches across and glittering like evil gems.

"A dragon, Keane," Doctor Satan purred. "You have seen old pictures of some such thing, painted by artists who had caught a glimpse of these things that can only visit earth when some necromancer conjures them to. A 'mythical' creature, Keane. But you shall feel how 'mythical' it is when it attacks you."

A HISS sounded in the dim room. The serpentine form was so solidly materialized now that it could scarcely be seen through. And in a few more seconds it was opaque. And weighty! The floor quivered a little as it moved—toward Keane.

Its great, gem-like eyes glinted like colored glass as it advanced, foot by foot, on the man who had pitted himself against Doctor Satan till the death of one of them should end the bitter war. But Keane did not move. He stood with shoulders squared and arms at his sides, facing the red-robed form.

" 'Out of the everywhere into the here,' " he murmured. His lips were pale but his voice was calm. "There is another saying, Doctor Satan. It is a little different. . . . 'Out of the *hereafter* into the here!' "

The unbelievable thing Doctor Satan had called into being in the midst of a city that would have scoffed at the idea of its existence, suddenly halted its slow, deadly approach toward Keane. Its hiss sounded again, and it raised a taloned foot and clawed the thin air in a direction to Keane's left.

It retreated a step, slinking low to the floor, its talons and scales rattling on the smooth cement. It seemed to see something beyond the reach of mortal eyes. But in a moment the things it saw were perceptible to the eyes of the two men, too. And as Doctor Satan saw them an imprecation came from his masked lips.

Three figures, distorted, horrible, yet familiar! Three things like statues of mist that became less misty and more solid-seeming by the second!

Three men who writhed as though in mortal torment, and whose lips jerked with soundless shrieks—which gradually became not entirely soundless but came to the ears of Satan and Keane like far-off cries dimly heard.

And the three were Varley and Croy and Kessler.

A gasp came from Doctor Satan's concealed lips. He shrank back, even as the monstrosity he had called into earthly being shrank back.

" 'Out of the hereafter into the here,' " Keane said softly. "These three you killed, Doctor Satan. They will now kill you!"

Varley and Croy and Kessler advanced

on the red-robed form. As they came they screamed with the pain of burning, and their blackened hands advanced, with fingers flexed, toward Satan. Such hatred was in their dead, glazed eyes, that waves of it seemed to surge about the room like a river in flood.

"They're shades," panted Doctor Satan. "They're not real, they can't actually do harm——"

"You will see how real they are when they attack you," Keane paraphrased Satan's words.

The three screaming figures converged on Doctor Satan. From death they had come, and before them was the man who had sent them to death. Their eyes were wells of fury and despair.

"My God!" whispered Doctor Satan, cowering. And the words, though far from lightly uttered, seemed doubly blasphemous coming from the lips under the diabolical red mask.

The hissing of the dragon-thing he had called into existence was inaudible. Its form was hardly to be seen. It was fleeing back into whatever realm it had come from. But the screaming three were advancing ever farther into our earthly plane as they crept toward the cowering body of Doctor Satan.

"My God!" Satan cried. "Not that! Not deliverance into the hands of those I——"

The three leaped. And Keane, with his face white as death at the horror he was witnessing, knew that the fight between him and the incarnate evil known as Doctor Satan was to end in this room.

The three leaped, and the red-robed figure went down. . . .

There was a thunderous battering at the door, and the bellow of men outside: "Open up, in the name of the law!"

Keane cried out, as though knife-blades had been thrust under his nails. Doctor Satan screamed, and thrust away from the three furies, while the three themselves mouthed and swayed like birds of prey in indecision over a field in which hunters bristle suddenly.

"Open this door!" the voice thundered again. "We know there's somebody in here——"

The shock of the change from the occult and unreal back to prosaic living was like the shock of being rudely waked from sound sleep when one has walked to the brink of a cliff and opens dazed eyes to stare at destruction. The introduction of such a thing as police, detectives, into a scene where two men were evoking powers beyond the ability of the average mortal even to comprehend, was like the insertion of an iron club into the intricate and fragile mechanism of a radio transmitting-station.

Keane literally staggered. Then he shouted: "For God's sake—get away from that door——"

"Open up, or we'll break in," the bellowing voice overrode his own.

Keane cursed, and turned. The three revengeful forces he had evoked for the destruction of Doctor Satan were gone, shattered into non-existence again with the advance of the prosaic. And Doctor Satan——

Keane got one glimpse of a torn red robe, with clots of deeper crimson on its arm, as the man slid through the inner door of the room and out to—God knew where. Some retreat he had prepared in advance, no doubt.

And then the door crashed down and the men Kessler had stubbornly and ruinously retained in his fight with Doctor Satan burst in.

They charged toward Keane.

"You're under arrest for extortion," the leader, a bull-necked man with a gun in his hand, roared out. "We traced the guy that took the dough from the skull here before we lost him."

Keane only looked at him. And at something in his stare, though the detective did not know him from Adam, he wilted a little.

"Stick out your hands while I handcuff you," he tried to bluster.

Then the manager of the building ran in.

"Did you get him?" he called to the detective. "Was he in here?" He saw the man the detective proposed to handcuff. "*Keane!* What has happened?"

"Doctor Satan has escaped," said Keane. "That's what has happened. I had him"—he held his hand out and slowly closed it—"like that! Then these well-intentioned blunderers broke in, and——"

His voice broke. His shoulders sagged. He stared at the door through which the red-robed figure had gone. Then his body straightened and his eyes grew calm again—though they were bleak with a weariness going far beyond physical fatigue.

"Gone," he said, more to himself than to anyone in the red-lit room. "But I'll find him again. And *next* time I'll fight him in some place where no outside interference can save him."

In Davy Jones's Locker

By ALFRED I. TOOKE

In Davy Jones's locker there are weird, fantastic things:
There are seven bleaching skeletons, all wearing diamond rings;
Their eyes are weed-filled sockets, and with every passing fin
That sets the seaweed waving, all the skulls appear to grin.

There's an eery group of pirates gathered round a chest of gold,
With their bony fingers clutching at the wealth they cannot hold.
There are jewels worth the ransom of a thousand kings or more,
But they lie around unheeded on old Davy Jones's floor.

There's a drunkard with a bottle that he never will uncork,
Though he clasps it to his bosom till his bones are white as chalk.
There's a devil-fish that's spawning in a million-dollar yacht,
With the owner still aboard her—and he doesn't care a jot.

There's an Emperor hobnobbing with a one-legged buccaneer—
Many strange and eery stories wait to greet the listening ear
When the final day has ended, and the last of Time has sped,
And the trump of doom is sounded and the sea gives up its dead.

"Her mouth curved into a twist of fiercely smiling anticipation."

The Dark Land

By C. L. MOORE

An amazing tale of a red-headed warrior maid, and a leprously white, skull-faced woman, and a flame that was quenched— by the author of "Shambleau"

IN HER great bed in the tower room of Joiry Castle, Jirel of Joiry lay very near to death. Her red hair was a blaze upon the pillow above the bone-whiteness of her face, and the lids lay heavy over the yellow fire of her eyes. Life had gushed out of her in great scarlet spurts from the pike-wound deep in her side, and the whispering women who hovered at the door were telling one another in hushed murmurs that the Lady Jirel had led her last battle charge. Never

again would she gallop at the head of her shouting men, swinging her sword with all the ferocity that had given her name such weight among the savage warrior barons whose lands ringed hers. Jirel of Joiry lay very still upon her pillow.

The great two-edged sword which she wielded so recklessly in the heat of combat hung on the wall now where her yellow eyes could find it if they opened, and her hacked and battered armor lay in a heap in one corner of the room just as the women had flung it as they stripped her when the grave-faced men-at-arms came shuffling up the stairs bearing the limp form of their lady, heavy in her mail. The room held the hush of death. Nothing in it stirred. On the bed Jirel's white face lay motionless among the pillows.

Presently one of the women moved forward and gently pulled the door to against their watching.

"It is unseemly to stare so," she reproved the others. "Our lady would not desire us to behold her thus until Father Gervais has shriven her sins away."

And the coifed heads nodded assent, murmurous among themselves. In a moment or two more a commotion on the stairs forced the massed watchers apart, and Jirel's serving-maid came up the steps holding a kerchief to her reddened eyes and leading Father Gervais. Someone pushed open the door for them, and the crowd parted to let them through.

The serving-maid stumbled forward to the bedside, mopping her eyes blindly. Behind her something obscurely wrong was happening. After a moment she realized what it was. A great stillness had fallen stunningly upon the crowd. She lifted a bewildered gaze toward the door. Gervais was staring at the bed in the blankest amazement.

"My child," he stammered, "where is your lady?"

The girl's head jerked round toward the bed. It was empty.

The sheets still lay exactly as they had covered Jirel, not pushed back as one pushes the blankets on arising. The hollow where her body had lain still held its shape among the yet warm sheets, and no fresh blood spattered the floor; but of the Lady of Joiry there was no sign.

Gervais' hands closed hard on his silver crucifix and under the fringe of gray hair his face crumpled suddenly into grief.

"Our dear lady has dabbled too often in forbidden things," he murmured to himself above the crucifix. "Too often. . . ."

Behind him trembling hands signed the cross, and awed whispers were already passing the word back down the crowded stairs: "The devil himself has snatched Jirel of Joiry body and soul out of her death-bed."

JIREL remembered shouts and screams and the din of battle, and that stunning impact in her side. Afterward nothing but dimness floating thickly above a bedrock of savage pain, and the murmur of voices from very far away. She drifted bodiless and serene upon a dark tide that was ebbing seaward, pulling her out and away while the voices and the pain receded to infinite distances, and faded and ceased.

Then somewhere a light was shining. She fought the realization weakly, for the dark tide pulled seaward and her soul desired the peace it seemed to promise with a longing beyond any words to tell. But the light would not let her go. Rebellious, struggling, at last she opened her eyes. The lids responded sluggishly, as if they had already forgotten obedience to her will. But she could see under the fringe of lashes, and she lay motionless, staring quietly while life flowed

back by slow degrees into the body it had so nearly left.

The light was a ring of flames, leaping golden against the dark beyond them. For a while she could see no more than that circlet of fire. Gradually perception returned behind her eyes, and reluctantly the body that had hovered so near to death took up the business of living again. With full comprehension she stared, and as she realized what it was she looked upon, incredulity warred with blank amazement in her dazed mind.

Before her a great image sat, monstrous and majestic upon a throne. Throne and image were black and shining. The figure was that of a huge man, wide-shouldered, tremendous, many times life size. His face was bearded, harsh with power and savagery, and very regal, haughty as Lucifer's might have been. He sat upon his enormous black throne staring arrogantly into nothingness. About his head the flames were leaping. She looked harder, unbelieving. How could she have come here? What was it, and where? Blank-eyed, she stared at that flaming crown that circled the huge head, flaring and leaping and casting queer bright shadows over the majestic face below them.

Without surprize, she found that she was sitting up. In her stupor she had not known the magnitude of her hurt, and it did not seem strange to her that no pain attended the motion, or that her pike-torn side was whole again beneath the doeskin tunic which was all she wore. She could not have known that the steel point of the pike had driven the leather into her flesh so deeply that her women had not dared to remove the garment lest they open the wound afresh and their lady die before absolution came to her. She only knew that she sat here naked in her doeskin tunic, her bare feet on a fur rug and cushions heaped about her. And all this was so strange and inexplicable that she made no attempt to understand.

The couch on which she sat was low and broad and black, and that fur rug in whose richness her toes were rubbing luxuriously was black too, and huger than any beast's pelt could be outside dreams.

Before her, across an expanse of gleaming black floor the mighty image rose, crowned with flame. For the rest, this great, black, dim-lighted room was empty. The flame-reflections danced eerily in the shining floor. She lifted her eyes, and saw with a little start of surprize that there was no ceiling. The walls rose immensely overhead, terminating in jagged abruptness above which a dark sky arched, sown with dim stars.

This much she had seen and realized before a queer glittering in the air in front of the image drew her roving eyes back. It was a shimmer and dance like the dance of dust motes in sunshine, save that the particles which glittered in the darkness were multicolored, dazzling. They swirled and swarmed before her puzzled eyes in a queer dance that was somehow taking shape in the light of the flames upon the image's head. A figure was forming in the midst of the rainbow shimmer. A man's figure, a tall, dark-visaged, heavy-shouldered man whose outlines among the dancing motes took on rapid form and solidarity, strengthening by moments until in a last swirl the gayly colored dazzle dissipated and the man himself stood wide-legged before her, fists planted on his hips, grinning darkly down upon the spell-bound Jirel.

He was the image. Save that he was of flesh and blood, life size, and the statue was of black stone and gigantic, there was no difference. The same harsh, arrogant, majestic face turned its grim smile upon Jirel. From under scowling black brows, eyes that glittered blackly with

little red points of intolerable brilliance blazed down upon her. She could not meet that gaze. A short black beard outlined the harshness of his jaw, and through it the white flash of his smile dazzled her.

This much about the face penetrated even Jirel's dazed amazement, and she caught her breath in a sudden gasp, sitting up straighter among her cushions and staring. The dark stranger's eyes were eager upon the long, lithe lines of her upon the couch. Red sparkles quickened in their deeps, and his grin widened.

"Welcome," he said, in a voice so deep and rich that involuntarily a little burr of answer rippled along Jirel's nerves. "Welcome to the dark land of Romne."

"Who brought me here?" Jirel found her voice at last. "And why?"

"I did it," he told her. "I—Pav, king of Romne. Thank me for it, Jirel of Joiry. But for Pav you had lain among the worms tonight. It was out of your death-bed I took you, and no power but mine could have mended the pike-hole in your side or put back into you the blood you spilled on Triste battlefield. Thank me, Jirel!"

She looked at him levelly, her yellow eyes kindling a little in rising anger as she met the laughter in his.

"Tell me why you brought me here."

At that he threw back his head and laughed hugely, a bull bellow of savage amusement that rang in deep echoes from the walls and beat upon her ears with the sound of organ notes. The room shook with his laughter; the little flames around the image's head danced to it.

"To be my bride, Joiry!" he roared. "That look of defiance ill becomes you, Jirel! Blush, lady, before your bridegroom!"

The blankness of the girl's amazement was all that saved her for the moment from the upsurge of murderous fury which was beginning to seethe below the surface of her consciousness. She could only stare as he laughed down at her, enjoying to the full her mute amaze.

"Yes," he said at last, "you have traveled too often in forbidden lands, Jirel of Joiry, to be ignored by us who live in them. And there is in you a hot and savage strength which no other woman in any land I know possesses. A force to match my own, Lady Jirel. None but you is fit to be my queen. So I have taken you for my own."

Jirel gasped in a choke of fury and found her voice again.

"Hell-dwelling madman!" she spluttered. "Black beast out of nightmares! Let me waken from this crazy dream!"

"It is no dream," he smiled infuriatingly. "As you died in Joiry Castle I seized you out of your bed and snatched you body and soul over the space-curve that parts this land from yours. You have awakened in your own dark kingdom, O Queen of Romne!" And he swept her an ironical salute, his teeth glittering in the darkness of his beard.

"By what right——" blazed Jirel.

"By a lover's right," he mocked her. "Is it not better to share Romne with me than to reign among the worms, my lady? For death was very near to you just now. I have saved your lovely flesh from a cold bed, Jirel, and kept your hot soul rooted there for you. Do I get no thanks for that?"

Yellow fury blazed in her eyes.

"The thanks of a sword-edge, if I had one," she flared. "Do you think to take Joiry like some peasant wench to answer to your whims? I'm Joiry, man! You must be mad!"

"I'm Pav," he answered her somberly, all mirth vanishing in a breath from his

heavy voice. "I'm king of Romne and lord of all who dwell therein. For your savageness I chose you, but do not try me too far, Lady Jirel!"

She looked up into the swart, harsh face staring down on her, and quite suddenly the nearest thing she had ever known to fear of a human being came coldly over her; perhaps the fear that if any man alive could tame her fierceness, this man could. The red prickles had gone out of his eyes, and something in her shuddered a little from that black, unpupiled stare. She veiled the hawk-yellow of her own gaze and set her lips in a straight line.

"I shall call your servants," said Pav heavily. "You must be clothed as befits a queen, and then I shall show you your land of Romne."

She saw the black glare of his eyes flick sidewise as if in search, and in the instant that his gaze sought them there appeared about her in the empty air the most curious phenomenon she had ever seen. Queer, shimmering bluenesses swam shoulder-high all around her, blue and translucent like hot flames, and like flames their outlines flickered. She never saw them clearly, but their touch upon her was like the caress a flame might give if it bore no heat: swift, brushing, light.

All about her they seethed, moving too quickly for the eyes to follow; all over her the quick, flickering caresses ran. And she felt queerly exhausted as they moved, as if strength were somehow draining out of her while the blue flames danced. When their bewildering ministrations ceased the strange weariness abated too, and Jirel in blank surprize looked down at her own long, lovely body sheathed in the most exquisite velvet she had ever dreamed of. It was black as a starless night, softer than down, rich and lustrous as it molded her shining curves into sculptured beauty. There was a sensuous delight in the soft swirl of it around her feet as she moved, in the dark caress of it upon her flesh when motion stirred the silken surfaces against her skin. For an instant she was lost in pure feminine escstasy.

But that lasted only for an instant. Then she heard Pav's deep voice saying, "Look!" and she lifted her eyes to a room whose outlines were melting away like smoke. The great image faded, the gleaming floor and the jagged, roofless walls turned translucent and misty, and through their melting surfaces mountains began to loom in the distance, dark trees and rough, uneven land. Before the echoes of Pav's deeply vibrant "Look!" had shivered wholly into silence along her answering nerves, the room had vanished and they two stood alone in the midst of the dark land of Romne.

It was a dark land indeed. As far as she could see, the air swallowed up every trace of color, so that in somber grays and blacks the landscape stretched away under her eyes. But it had a curious clarity, too, in the dark, translucent air. She could see the distant mountains black and clear beyond the black trees. Beyond them, too, she caught a gleam of still black water, and under her feet the ground was black and rocky. And there was a curiously circumscribed air about the place. Somehow she felt closed in as she stared, for the horizon seemed nearer than it should be, and its dark circle bound the little world of grayness and blackness and clear, dark air into a closeness she could not account for.

She felt prisoned in and a little breathless, for all the wide country spreading so clearly, so darkly about her. Perhaps it was because even out at the far edge of the sky everything was as distinct in the transparent darkness of the air as the rocks at her very feet, so that there was no sense of distance here at all.

Yes, it was a dark land, and a strange land, forbidding, faintly nightmarish in the color-swallowing clarity of its air, the horizons too near and too clear in the narrowness of their circle.

"This," said Pav beside her, in his nerve-tingling voice that sent unconquerable little shudders of answer along her resounding nerves, "this is your land of Romne, O Queen! A land wider than it looks, and one well befitted to your strength and loveliness, my Jirel. A strange land, too, by all earthly standards. Later you must learn how strange. The illusion of it——"

"Save your breath, King of Romne," Jirel broke in upon his deep-voiced speech. "This is no land of mine, and holds no interest for me save in its way out. Show me the gate back into my own world, and I shall be content never to see Romne or you again."

Pav's big hand shot out and gripped her shoulder ungently. He swung her round in a swirl of velvet skirts and a toss of fire-colored hair, and his dark, bearded face was savage with anger. The little red dazzles danced in his unpupiled black eyes until she could not focus her own hot yellow gaze upon them, and dropped her eyes from his in helpless fury.

"You are mine!" he told her in a voice so deep and low that her whole body tingled to its vibration. "I took you out of Joiry and your death-bed and the world you knew, and you are mine from this moment on. Strong you may be, but not so strong as I, Jirel of Joiry, and when I command, henceforth obey!"

BLIND with fury, Jirel ripped his hand away and fell back one step in a swirl of black skirts. She tossed her head up until the curls upon it leaped like flames, and the scorching anger in her voice licked up in matching flames, so hotly that her speech was broken and breathless as she choked in a half-whisper,

"Never touch me again, you black hell-dweller! Before God, you'd never have dared if you'd left me a knife to defend myself with! I swear I'll tear the eyes out of your head if I feel the weight of your hand on me again! Yours, you filthy wizard? You'll never have me—never, if I must die to escape you! By my name I swear it!"

She choked into silence, not for lack of words but because the mounting fury that seethed up in her throat drowned out all further sound. Her eyes were blazing yellow with scorching heat, and her fingers flexed like claws eager for blood.

The King of Romne grinned down at her, thumbs hooked in his belt and derision gleaming whitely in the whiteness of his smile. The little beard jutted along his jaw, and red lights were flickering in the fathomless darkness of his eyes.

"You think so, eh, Joiry!" he mocked her, deep-voiced. "See what I *could* do!"

He did not shift a muscle, but even through her blinding fury she was aware of a sudden altering in him, a new power and command. His red-gleaming eyes were hot upon hers, and with sick anger she realized anew that she could not sustain that gaze. There was something frightening in the unpupiled blackness of it, the blazing, unbearable strength that beat out from it in heavy command. It was a command all out of proportion to his moveless silence, a command that wrenched at her intolerably. She must obey—she must. . . .

Suddenly a fresh wave of soul-scorching heat surged over her, blindingly, terribly, in such a burst that the whole dark land of Romne blazed into nothingness and she lost all grip upon reality. The rocky ground swirled sidewise and van-

ished. The dark world dissolved around her. She was not flesh and blood but a white-hot incandescence of pure rage. Through the furnace heat of it, as through a shimmer of flame, she saw the body that her own violence had wrenched her out of. It stood straight in its gown of velvety blackness, facing Pav's unmoving figure defiantly. But as she watched, a weakening came over it. The stiffness went out of its poise, the high red head drooped. Helplessly she watched her own forsaken body moving forward step by reluctant step, as if the deserted flesh itself resented the subjection so forced upon it. She saw herself come to Pav's feet. She saw her black-sheathed body bend submissively, ripple pliantly to its knees. In a stillness beyond any ultimate climax of incarnate fury, she saw herself abased before Pav, her head bowed, her body curving into lines of warm surrender at his feet.

And she was afraid. For from somewhere a power was beating of such intolerable magnitude that even the inferno of her fury was abashed before it. Her body's obedience lost all significance in the rush of that terrible force. She would have thought that it radiated from Pav had it been possible for any human creature to sustain such an incredible force as that she was so fleetingly aware of.

For the briefest instant the knowledge of that power was all around her, terrifyingly, thunderously. It was too tremendous a thing to endure in her state of unbodied vulnerability. It scorched her like strong flame. And she was afraid—for Pav was the center of that inferno's might, and he could be no human thing who radiated such an infinity of power. What was he? What *could* he be?

In that instant she was horribly afraid —soul-naked in the furnace blast of something too tremendous . . . too terrible. . . .

Then the moment of separation ceased. With a rush and a dazzle she was back in her kneeling body, and the knowledge of that power faded from about her and the humiliation of her pose burned again hotly in her throat. Like a spring released she leaped to her feet, starting back and blazing into Pav's smiling face so hotly that her whole body seemed incandescent with the rage that flooded back into it. That moment of terror was fuel to feed the blaze, for she was not naked now, not bodiless and undefended from the force she had so briefly sensed, and anger that she had been exposed to it, that she had felt terror of it, swelled with the fury of her abasement before Pav. She turned eyes like two pits of hell-blaze upon her tormenter. But before she could speak:

"I admit your power," said Pav in a somewhat surprized voice. "I could conquer your body thus, but only by driving out the blaze that is yourself. I have never known before a mortal creature so compounded that my will could not conquer his. It proves you a fit mate for Pav of Romne. But though I could force you to my command, I shall not. I desire no woman against her will. You are a little human thing, Jirel, and your fullest strength against mine is like a candle in the sun—but in these last few minutes I have learned respect for you. Will you bargain with me?"

"I'd bargain sooner with the Devil," she whispered hotly. "Will you let me go, or must I die to be free?"

Somberly he looked down at her. The smile had vanished from his bearded mouth, and a dark majesty was brooding upon the swarthy face turned down to hers. His eyes flashed red no longer. They were black with so deep a blackness that they seemed two holes of fathomless space—two windows into infinity. To look into them sent something in Jirel sick with sudden vertigo. Somehow, as she stared, her white-blazing fury cooled

a little. Again she felt subtly that here was no human thing into whose eyes she gazed. A quiver of fright struggled up through her fading anger. At last he spoke.

"What I take I do not lightly give up. No, there is in you a heady violence that I desire, and will not surrender. But I do not wish you against your will."

"Give me a chance then, at escape," said Jirel. Her boiling anger had died almost wholly away under his somber, dizzying gaze, in the memory of that instant when inferno itself had seemed to beat upon her from the power of his command. But there had not abated in her by any fraction of lessening purpose the determination not to yield. Indeed, she was strengthened against him by the very knowledge of his more than human power—the thing which in her unbodied nakedness had burned like a furnace blast against the defenseless soul of her was terrible enough even in retrospect to steel all her resolution against surrender. She said in a steady voice,

"Let me seek through your land of Romne the gateway back into my own world. If I fail——"

"You cannot but fail. There is no gateway by which you could pass."

"I am unarmed," she said desperately, grasping at straws in her determination to find some excuse to leave him. "You have taken me helpless and weaponless into your power, and I shall not surrender. Not until you have shown yourself my master—and I do not think you can. Give me a weapon and let me prove that!"

Pav smiled down on her as a man smiles on a rebellious child.

"You have no idea what you ask," he said. "I am not"—he hesitated—"perhaps not wholly as I seem to you. Your greatest skill could not prevail against me."

"Then let me find a weapon!" Her voice trembled a little with the anxiety to be free of him, to find somehow an escape from the intolerable blackness of his eyes, the compulsion of his presence. For every moment that those terrible eyes beat so hotly upon her she felt her resistance weaken more, until she knew that if she did not leave him soon all strength would melt away in her and her body of its own will sink once more into surrender at his feet. To cover her terror she blustered, but her voice was thick. "Give me a weapon! There is no man alive who is not somehow vulnerable. I shall learn your weakness, Pav of Romne, and slay you with it. And if I fail—then take me."

The smile faded slowly from Pav's bearded lips. He stood in silence, looking down at her, and the fathomless darkness of his eyes radiated power like heat in such insupportable strength that her own gaze fell before it and she stared down at her velvet skirt-hem on the rocks. At last he said,

"Go, then. If that will content you, seek some means to slay me. But when you fail, remember—you have promised to acknowledge me your lord."

"If I fail!" Relief surged up in Jirel's throat. "*If* I fail!"

He smiled again briefly, and then somehow all about his magnificent dark figure a swirl of rainbow dazzle was dancing. She stared, half afraid, half in awe, watching the tall, black tangibility of him melting easily into that multicolored whirling she had seen before, until nothing was left but the dazzling swirl that slowed and faded and dissipated upon the dark air—and she was alone.

She drew a deep breath as the last of the rainbow shimmer faded into nothing. It was a heavenly relief not to feel the unbearable power of him beating unceasingly against her resistance, not to keep

tense to the breaking-point all the strength that was in her. She turned away from the spot where he had vanished and scanned the dark land of Romne, telling herself resolutely that if she found no gateway, no weapon, then death itself must open the way out of Romne. There was about Pav's terrible strength something that set the nerves of her humanity shuddering against it. In her moment of soul-nakedness she had sensed that too fully ever to surrender. The inferno of the *thing* that was Pav burning upon her unbodied consciousness had been the burning of something so alien that she knew with every instinct in her that she would die if she must, rather than submit. Pav's body was the body of a man, but it was not—she sensed it intuitively—as a man alone that he desired her, and from surrender to the dark intensity of what lay beyond the flesh her whole soul shuddered away.

She looked about helplessly. She was standing upon stones, her velvet skirts sweeping black jagged rock that sloped down toward the distant line of trees. She could see the shimmer of dark water between them, and above and beyond their swaying tops the black mountains loomed. Nowhere was there any sign of the great chamber where the image sat. Nowhere could she see anything but deserted rocks, empty meadows, trees where no birds sang. Over the world of grayness and blackness she stood staring.

And again she felt that sense of imprisonment in the horizon's dark, close bounds. It was a curiously narrow land, this Romne. She felt it intuitively, though there was no visible barrier closing her in. In the clear, dark air even the mountains' distant heights were distinct and colorless and black.

She faced them speculatively, wondering how far away their peaks lay. A dark thought was shadowing her mind, for it came to her that if she found no escape from Romne and from Pav the mountains alone offered that final escape which she was determined to take if she must. From one of those high, sheer cliffs she could leap. . . .

It was not tears that blurred the black heights suddenly. She stared in bewilderment, lifted dazed hands to rub her eyes, and then stared again. Yes, no mistake about it, the whole panorama of the land of Romne was melting like mist about her. The dark trees with their glint of lake beyond, the rocky foreground, everything faded and thinned smokily, while through the vanishing contours those far mountains loomed up near and clear overhead. Dizzy with incomprehension, she found herself standing amid the shreds of dissipating landscape at the very foot of those mountains which a moment before had loomed high and far on the edge of the horizon. Pav had been right indeed—Romne was a strange land. What had he said—about the illusion of it?

She looked up, trying to remember, seeing the dark slopes tilting over her head. High above, on a ledge of outcropping stone, she could see gray creepers dropping down the rocky sides, the tips of tall trees waving. She stared upward toward the ledge whose face she could not see, wondering what lay beyond the vine-festooned edges. And:

In a thin, dark fog the mountainside melted to her gaze. Through it, looming darkly and more darkly as the fog thinned, a level plateau edged with vines and thick with heavy trees came into being before her. She stood at the very edge of it, the dizzy drop of the mountain falling sheer behind her. By no path that feet can tread could she have come to this forested plateau.

One glance she cast backward and

down from her airy vantage above the dark land of Romne. It spread out below her in a wide horizon-circle of black rock and black waving tree-tops and colorless hills, clear in the clear, dark air of Romne. Nowhere was anything but rock and hills and trees, clear and distinct out to the horizon in the color-swallowing darkness of the air. No sight of man's occupancy anywhere broke the somberness of its landscape. The great black hall where the image burned might never have existed save in dreams. A prison land it was, narrowly bound by the tight circle of the sky.

Something insistent and inexplicable tugged at her attention then, breaking off abruptly that scanning of the land below. Not understanding why, she answered the compulsion to turn. And when she had turned she stiffened into rigidity, one hand halting in a little futile reach after the knife that no longer swung at her side; for among the trees a figure was approaching.

It was a woman—or could it be? White as leprosy against the blackness of the trees, with a whiteness that no shadows touched, so that she seemed like some creature out of another world reflecting in dazzling pallor upon the background of the dark, she paced slowly forward. She was thin—deathly thin, and wrapped in a white robe like a winding-sheet. The black hair lay upon her shoulders as snakes might lie.

But it was her face that caught Jirel's eyes and sent a chill of sheer terror down her back. It was the face of Death itself, a skull across which the white, white flesh was tightly drawn. And yet it was not without a certain stark beauty of its own, the beauty of bone so finely formed that even in its death's-head nakedness it was lovely.

There was no color upon that face anywhere. White-lipped, eyes shadowed, the creature approached with a leisured swaying of the long robe, a leisured swinging of the long black hair lying in snake-strands across the thin white shoulders. And the nearer the—the woman?—came the more queerly apart from the land about her she seemed. Bone-white, untouched by any shadow save in the sockets of her eyes, she was shockingly detached from even the darkness of the air. Not all of Romne's dim, color-veiling asmosphere could mask the staring whiteness of her, almost blinding in its unshadowed purity.

As she came nearer, Jirel sought instinctively for the eyes that should be fixed upon her from those murky hollows in the scarcely fleshed skull. If they were there, she could not see them. An obscurity clouded the dim sockets where alone shadows clung, so that the face was abstract and sightless—not blind, but more as if the woman's thoughts were far away and intent upon something so absorbing that her surroundings held nothing for the hidden eyes to dwell on.

She paused a few paces from the waiting Jirel and stood quietly, not moving. Jirel had the feeling that from behind those shadowy hollows where the darkness clung like cobwebs a close and critical gaze was analyzing her, from red head to velvet-hidden toes. At last the bloodless lips of the creature parted and from them a voice as cool and hollow as a tomb fell upon Jirel's ears in queer, reverberating echoes, as if the woman spoke from far away in deep caverns underground, coming in echo upon echo out of the depths of unseen vaults, though the air was clear and empty about her. Just as her shadowless whiteness gave the illusion of a reflection from some other world, so the voice seemed also to come from echoing distances. Its hollowness said slowly,

"So here is the mate Pav chose. A red

woman, eh? Red as his own flame. What are you doing here, bride, so far from your bridegroom's arms?"

"Seeking a weapon to slay him with!" said Jirel hotly. "I am not a woman to be taken against her will, and Pav is no choice of mine."

Again she felt that hidden scrutiny from the pits of the veiled eyes. When the cool voice spoke it held a note of incredulity that sounded clearly even in the hollowness of its echo from the deeps of invisible tombs.

"Are you mad? Do you not know what Pav is? You actually seek to *destroy* him?"

"Either him or myself," said Jirel angrily. "I know only that I shall never yield to him, whatever he may be."

"And you came—here. Why? How did you know? How did you dare?" The voice faded and echoes whispered down vaults and caverns of unseen depth ghostily, "—did you dare—did you dare—you dare. . . ."

"Dare what?" demanded Jirel uneasily. "I came here because—because when I gazed upon the mountains, suddenly the world dissolved around me and I was—was here."

This time she was quite sure that a long, deep scrutiny swept her from head to feet, boring into her eyes as if it would read her very thoughts, though the cloudy pits that hid the woman's eyes revealed nothing. When her voice sounded again it held a queer mingling of relief and amusement and stark incredulity as it reverberated out of its hollow, underground places.

"Is this ignorance or guile, woman? Can it be that you do not understand even the secret of the land of Romne, or why, when you gazed at the mountains, you found yourself here? Surely even you must not have imagined Romne to be—as it seems. Can you possibly have come here unarmed and alone, to my very mountain—to my very grove—to my very face? You say you seek destruction?" The cool voice murmured into laughter that echoed softly from unseen walls and caverns in diminishing sounds, so that when the woman spoke again it was to the echoes of her own fading mirth. "How well you have found your way! Here is death for you—here at my hands! For you must have known that I shall surely kill you!"

Jirel's heart leaped thickly under her velvet gown. Death she had sought, but not death at the hands of such a thing as this. She hesitated for words, but curiosity was stronger even than her sudden jerk of reflexive terror, and after a moment she contrived to ask, in a voice of rigid steadiness,

"Why?"

Again the long, deep scrutiny from eyeless sockets. Under it Jirel shuddered, somehow not daring to take her gaze from that leprously white, skull-shaped face, though the sight of it sent little shivers of revulsion along her nerves. Then the bloodless lips parted again and the cool, hollow voice fell echoing on her ears,

"I can scarcely believe that you do not know. Surely Pav must be wise enough in the ways of women—even such as I—to know what happens when rivals meet. No, Pav shall see his bride again, and the white witch will be queen once more. Are you ready for death, Jirel of Joiry?"

THE last words hung hollowly upon the dark air, echoing and re-echoing from invisible vaults. Slowly the arms of the corpse-creature lifted, trailing the white robe in great pale wings, and the hair stirred upon her shoulders like living things. It seemed to Jirel that a light was beginning to glimmer through the shadows that clung like cobwebs to the skull-

face's sockets, and somehow she knew chokingly that she could not bear to gaze upon what was dawning there if she must throw herself backward off the cliff to escape it. In a voice that strangled with terror she cried,

"Wait!"

The pale-winged arms hesitated in their lifting; the light which was dawning behind the shadowed eye-sockets for a moment ceased to brighten through the veiling. Jirel plunged on desperately,

"There is no need to slay me. I would very gladly go if I knew the way out."

"No," the cold voice echoed from reverberant distances. "There would be the peril of you always, existing and waiting. No, you must die or my sovereignty is at an end."

"Is it sovereignty or Pav's love that I peril, then?" demanded Jirel, the words tumbling over one another in her breathless eagerness lest unknown magic silence her before she could finish.

The corpse-witch laughed a cold little echo of sheer scorn.

"There is no such thing as love," she said, "—for such as I."

"Then," said Jirel quickly, a feverish hope beginning to rise behind her terror, "then let me be the one to slay. Let me slay Pav as I set out to do, and leave this land kingless, for your rule alone."

For a dreadful moment the half-lifted arms of the figure that faced her so terribly hesitated in midair; the light behind the shadows of her eyes flickered. Then slowly the winged arms fell, the eyes dimmed into cloud-filled hollows again. Blind-faced, impersonal, the skull turned toward Jirel. And curiously, she had the idea that calculation and malice and a dawning idea that spelled danger for her were forming behind that expressionless mask of white-fleshed bone. She could feel tensity and peril in the air—a subtler danger than the frank threat of killing. Yet when the white witch spoke there was nothing threatening in her words. The hollow voice sounded as coolly from its echoing caverns as if it had not a moment before been threatening death.

"There is only one way in which Pav can be destroyed," she said slowly. "It is a way I dare not attempt, nor would any not already under the shadow of death. I think not even Pav knows of it. If you——" The hollow tones hesitated for the briefest instant, and Jirel felt, like the breath of a cold wind past her face, the certainty that there was a deeper danger here, in this unspoken offer, than even in the witch's scarcely stayed death-magic. The cool voice went on, with a tingle of malice in its echoing,

"If you dare risk this way of clearing my path to the throne of Romne, you may go free."

JIREL hesitated, so strong had been that breath of warning to the danger-accustomed keenness of her senses. It was not a genuine offer—not a true path of escape. She was sure of that, though she could not put her finger on the flaw she sensed so strongly. But she knew she had no choice.

"I accept, whatever it is," she said, "my only hope of winning back to my own land again. What is this thing you speak of?"

"The—the flame," said the witch half hesitantly, and again Jirel felt a sidelong scrutiny from the cobwebbed sockets, almost as if the woman scarcely expected to be believed. "The flame that crowns Pav's image. If it can be quenched, Pav —dies." And queerly she laughed as she said it, a cool little ripple of scornful amusement. It was somehow like a blow in the face, and Jirel felt the blood rising to her cheeks as if in answer to a tangible slap. For she knew that the scorn was

directed at herself, though she could not guess why.

"But how?" she asked, striving to keep bewilderment out of her voice.

"With flame," said the white witch quickly. "Only with flame can that flame be quenched. I think Pav must at least once have made use of those little blue fires that flicker through the air about your body. Do you know them?"

Jirel nodded mutely.

"They are the manifestations of your own strength, called up by him. I can explain it no more clearly to you than that. You must have felt a momentary exhaustion as they moved. But because they are essentially a part of your own human violence, here in this land of Romne, which is stranger and more alien than you know, they have the ability to quench Pav's flame. You will not understand that now. But when it happens, you will know why. I cannot tell you.

"You must trick Pav into calling forth the blue fire of your own strength, for only he can do that. And then you must concentrate all your forces upon the flame that burns around the image. Once it is in existence, you can control the blue fire, send it out to the image. You must do this. Will you? Will you?"

The tall figure of the witch leaned forward eagerly, her white skull-face thrusting nearer in an urgency that not even the veiled, impersonal eye-sockets could keep from showing. And though she had imparted the information that the flame held Pav's secret life in a voice of hollow reverberant mockery, as if the statement were a contemptuous lie, she told of its quenching with an intensity of purpose that proclaimed it unmistakable truth. "Will you?" she demanded again in a voice that shook a little with nameless violence.

Jirel stared at the white-fleshed skull in growing disquiet. There was a danger here that she could feel almost tangibly. And somehow it centered upon this thing which the corpse-witch was trying to force her into promising. Somehow she was increasingly sure of that. And rebellion suddenly flamed within her. If she must die, then let her do it now, meeting death face to face and not in some obscurity of cat's-paw witchcraft in the attempt to destroy Pav. She would not promise.

"No," she heard her own voice saying in sudden violence. "No, I will not!"

Across the skull-white face of the witch convulsive fury swept. It was the rage of thwarted malice, not the disappointment of a plotter. The hollow voice choked behind grinning lips, but she lifted her arms like great pale wings again, and a glare of hell-fire leaped into being among the shadows that clung like cobwebs to her eye-sockets. For a moment she stood towering, white and terrible, above the earthwoman, in a tableau against the black woods of unshadowed bone-whiteness, dazzling in the dark air of Romne, terrible beyond words in the power of her gathering magic.

Then Jirel, rigid with horror at the light brightening so ominously among the shadows of these eyeless sockets, saw terror sweep suddenly across the convulsed face, quenching the anger in a cold tide of deadly fear.

"Pav!" gasped the chill voice hollowly. "Pav comes!"

JIREL swung round toward the far horizon, seeking what had struck such fear into the leprously white skull-face, and with a little gasp of reprieve saw the black figure of her abductor enormous on the distant skyline. Through the clear dark air she could see him plainly, even to the sneering arrogance upon his bearded face, and a flicker of hot rebellion went through her. Even in the knowledge of

his black and terrible power, the human insolence of him struck flame from the flint of her resolution, and she began to burn with a deep-seated anger again which not even his terror could quench, not even her amazement at the incredible size of him.

For he strode among the tree-tops like a colossus, gigantic, heaven-shouldering, swinging in league-long strides across the dark land spread out panorama-like under that high ledge where the two women stood. He was nearing in great distance-devouring steps, and it seemed to Jirel that he diminished in stature as the space between them lessened. Now the tree-tops were creaming like black surf about his thighs. She saw anger on his face, and she heard a little gasp behind her. She whirled in quick terror, for surely now the witch would slay her with no more delay, before Pav could come near enough to prevent.

But when she turned she saw that the pale corpse-creature had forgotten her in the frantic effort to save herself. And she was working a magic that for an instant wiped out from Jirel's wondering mind even her own peril, even the miraculous oncoming of Pav. She had poised on her toes, and now in a swirl of shroud-like robes and snaky hair she began to spin. At first she revolved laboriously, but in a few moments the jerky whirling began to smooth out and quicken and she was revolving without effort, as if she utilized a force outside Jirel's understanding, as if some invisible whirlwind spun her faster and faster in its vortex, until she was a blur of shining, unshadowed whiteness wrapped in the dark snakes of her hair—until she was nothing but a pale mist against the forest darkness—until she had vanished utterly.

Then, as Jirel stared in dumb bewilderment, a little chill wind that somehow seemed to blow from immeasurably far distances, from cool, hollow, underground places, brushed her cheek briefly, without ruffling a single red curl. It was not a tangible wind. And from empty air a hand that was bone-hard dealt her a stinging blow in the face. An incredibly tiny, thin, far-away voice sang in her ear as if over gulfs of measureless vastness,

"That for watching my spell, red woman! And if you do not keep our bargain, you shall feel the weight of my magic. Remember!"

Then in a great gush of wind and a trample of booted feet Pav was on the ledge beside her, and no more than life-size now, tall, black, magnificent as before, radiant with arrogance and power. He stared hotly, with fathomless blackness in his eyes, at the place where the mist that was the witch had faded. Then he laughed contemptuously.

"She is safe enough—there," he said. "Let her stay. You should not have come here, Jirel of Joiry."

"I didn't come," she said in sudden, childish indignation against everything that had so mystified her, against his insolent voice and the arrogance and power of him, against the necessity for owing to him her rescue from the witch's magic. "I didn't come. The—the mountain came! All I did was look at it, and suddenly it was here."

His deep bull-bellow of laughter brought the blood angrily to her cheeks.

"You must learn that secret of your land of Romne," he said indulgently. "It is not constructed on the lines of your old world. And only by slow degrees, as you grow stronger in the magic which I shall teach you, can you learn the full measure of Romne's strangeness. It is enough for you to know now that distances here are measured in different terms from those you know. Space and matter are subordinated to the power of the mind, so that when you desire to

reach a place you need only concentrate upon it to bring it into focus about you, succeeding the old landscape in which you stood.

"Later you must see Romne in its true reality, walk through Romne as Romne really is. Later, when you are my queen."

The old hot anger choked up in Jirel's throat. She was not so afraid of him now, for a weapon was in her hands which even he did not suspect. She knew his vulnerability. She cried defiantly,

"Never, then! I'd kill you first."

His scornful laughter broke into her threat.

"You could not do that, my pretty," he told her, deep-voiced. "I have said before that there is no way. Do you think I could be mistaken about that?"

She glared at him with hot, yellow eyes, indiscretion hovering on her lips. Almost she blurted it out, but not quite. In a choke of anger she turned her face away, going prickly and hot at the deep laughter behind her.

"Have you had your fill of seeking weapons against me?" he went on, still in that voice of mingling condescension and arrogance.

She hesitated a moment. Somehow she must get them both back into the hall of the image. In a voice that trembled she said at last,

"Yes."

"Shall we go back then, to my palace, and prepare for the ceremony which will make you queen?"

THE deep voice was still shuddering along her nerves as the mountain behind them and the great dark world below melted together in a mirage through which, as through a veil, a flame began to glow; the flame about an image's head—an image gigantic in a great black hall whose unroofed walls closed round them in magical swiftness. Jirel stared, realizing bewilderedly that without stirring a step she had somehow come again into the black hall where she had first opened her eyes.

A qualm of remembrance came over her as she recalled how fervently she had sworn to herself to die somehow, rather than return here into Pav's power. But now she was armed. She need have no fear now. She looked about her.

Black and enormous, the great image loomed up above them both. She lifted a gaze of new respect to that leaping diadem of flame which crowned the face that was Pav's. She did not understand what it was she must do now, or clearly how to do it, but the resolve was hot in her to take any way out that might lie open rather than submit to the dark power that dwelt in the big, black man at her side.

Hands fell upon her shoulders then, heavily. She whirled in a swirl of velvet skirts into Pav's arms, tight against his broad breast. His breath was hot in her face, and upon her like the beating of savage suns burned the intolerable blackness of his eyes. She could no more meet their heat than she could have stared into a sun. A sob of pure rage choked up in her throat as she thrust hard with both hands against the broad black chest to which she was crushed. He loosed her without a struggle. She staggered with the suddenness of it, and then he had seized her wrist in an iron grip, twisting savagely. Jirel gasped in a wrench of pain and dropped helplessly to one knee. Above her the heavy and ominous voice of Romne's king said in its deepest, most velvety burr, so that she shook to the very depths in that drum-beat of savage power,

"Resist me again and—things can happen here too dreadful for your brain to grasp even if I told you. Beware of me, Jirel, for Pav's anger is a terrible thing. You have found no weapon to

conquer me, and now you must submit to the bargain you yourself proposed. Are you ready, Jirel of Joiry?"

She bent her head so that her face was hidden, and her mouth curved into a twist of fiercely smiling anticipation.

"Yes," she said softly.

Then abruptly, amazingly, upon her face a cold wind blew, heavy with the odor of chill hollowness underground, and in her ears was the thin and tiny coldness of a voice she knew, echoing from reverberant vaults over gulfs unthinkable,

"Ask him to clothe you in bridal dress. Ask him! Ask him now!"

Across the screen of her memory flashed a face like a white-fleshed skull to whose eye-sockets cobwebby shadows clung, whose pale mouth curled in a smile of bitter scorn, maliciously urging her on. But she dared not disobey, for she had staked everything now on the accomplishment of the witch's bargain. Dangerous it might be, but there was worse danger waiting here and now, in Pav's space-black eyes. The thin shrill ceased and the tomb-smelling wind faded, and she heard her own voice saying,

"Let me up, then. Let me up—I am ready. Only am I to have no bridal dress for my wedding? For black ill becomes a bride."

He could not have heard that thin, far-calling echo of a voice, for his dark face did not change and there was no suspicion in his eyes. The iron clutch of his fingers loosened. Jirel swung to her feet lithely and faced him with downcast eyes, not daring to unveil the yellow triumph that blazed behind her lashes.

"My wedding gown," she reminded him, still in that voice of strangled gentleness.

He laughed, and his eyes sought in empty air. It was the most imperiously regal thing conceivable, that assured glance into emptiness for what, by sheer knowledge of his own power, must materialize in answer to the king of Romne's questing. And all about her, glowing into existence under the sun-hot blackness of Pav's eyes, the soft blue flames were suddenly licking.

WEAKNESS crawled over her as the blueness seethed about her body, brushing, caressing, light as fire-tongues upon her, murmurous with the soft, flickering sounds of quiet flame. A weariness like death was settling into her very bones, as if life itself were draining away into the caressive ministrations of those blue and heatless flames. She exulted in her very weakness, knowing how much of her strength must be incarnate, then, in the flames which were to quench Pav's flame. And they would need strength—all she had.

Then again the cold wind blew from hollow tombs, as if through an opened door, and upon the intangible breath of it that did not stir one red curl upon her cheek, though she felt its keenness clearly, the thin, small echo of the corpse-witch's voice cried, tiny and far over spaces beyond measurement,

"Focus them on the Flame—now, now! Quickly! Ah—fool!"

And the ghost of a thin, cool laugh, stinging with scorn, drifted through the measureless voids. Reeling with weakness, Jirel obeyed. The derision in that tiny, far-away voice was like a spur to drive her, though ready anger surged up in her throat against that strange scorn for which she could find no reason. As strongly as before she felt the breath of danger when the corpse-witch spoke, but she ignored it now, knowing in her heart that Pav must die if she were ever to know peace again, let his dying cost her what it might.

She set her teeth in her red underlip

and in the pain of it drove all her strength into a strong focusing upon the flame that burned around the great imaged Pav's head. What would happen she did not know, but in the fog of her weakness, stabbed by her bitten lip's pain, she fought with all the force she had to drive those flames curling like caresses about her body straight toward the flame-crown on the image's majestic brow.

And presently, in little tentative thrusts, the blue tongues that licked her so softly began to turn away from the velvety curves of her own body and reach out toward the image. Sick with weakness as the strength drained out of her into the pulling flames, she fought on, and in an arc that lengthened and stretched away the flames began to forsake her and reach flickeringly out toward the great black statue that loomed overhead.

From far away she heard Pav's deep voice shouting on a note of sudden panic,

"Jirel, Jirel! Don't! Oh, little fool, don't do it!"

It seemed to her that his voice was not that of a man afraid for his own life, but rather as if it was peril to herself he would avert. But she could pay him no heed at all now. Nothing was real but the sharp necessity to quench the image's flame, and she poured all the strength that was left to her into the rainbow of flickering blueness that was arching up toward the image.

"Jirel, Jirel!" the deep voice of Pav was storming from somewhere in the fog of her weakness. "Stop! You don't know——"

A blast of cold wind drowned the rest of his words, and:

"S-s-s! Go on!" hissed the corpse-witch's voice tinily in her ear. "Don't listen to him! Don't let him stop you! He can't touch you while the blue flames burn! Go on! Go on!"

And she went on. Half fainting, wholly blind now to everything but that stretching arc of blue, she fought. And it lengthened as she poured more and more of her strength into it, reached up and out and grew by leaping degrees until the blue flames were mingling with the red, and over that blazing crown a dimness began to fall. From somewhere in the blind mist of her exhaustion Pav's voice shouted with a note of despair in its shudderingly vibrant depths,

"Oh, Jirel, Jirel! What have you done?"

Exultation surged up in her. The hot reserves of her anger against him flooded over and strength like wine boiled up through her body. In one tremendous burst of fierce energy she hurled every ounce of her newly-won power against the flame. Triumphantly she saw it flicker. There was a moment of guttering twilight; then abruptly the light went out and red flame and blue vanished in a breath. A crashing darkness like the weight of falling skies dropped thunderously about her.

SICK to the very soul with reactionary weakness as the tremendous effort relaxed at last, she heard from reeling distances Pav's voice call wordlessly. All about her the dark was heavy, with a crushing weight that somehow made her whole body ache as if with the pressure of deep seas. In the heaviness of it she scarcely realized that the voice was shouting at all; but even through the dimness of her failing senses she knew that there was something tremendously wrong with it. In a mighty effort she rallied herself, listening.

Yes—he was trying to speak, trying to tell her something that she knew intuitively was of infinite importance. But his voice was ceasing to be a human voice, becoming less and less articulate and

more and more a mighty roaring like the voice of incalculable power. In such a voice a typhoon might speak, or a dynamo more tremendous than any man ever made.

"Jirel—Jirel—why did you . . ." So much she made out before the words rushed together and melted into that thunderous roar which was the very voice of infinity itself. The darkness was full of it—one with it—intolerable violence upon her ears, intolerable pressure of the black dark upon her body.

Through the roaring void a keen wind blew hollow with the smell of tombs. Jirel, trying to whirl to face it, found herself incapable of motion, a finite and agonized thing in the midst of crashing black thunder whose sound was torment in her brain, whose weight was crushing her very atoms in upon themselves until consciousness flickered within her like a guttering candle flame.

But there was no need to turn. Directions had ceased to be. The wind smote her turned cheek, but before her, as if through an opened door from which coldness streamed, she was aware of a white-shrouded figure floating upon the blackness; an unshadowed figure, staringly white, not touched by anything the blackness could muster against it. Even through that terrible roaring of pure power the corpse-witch's voice struck low and cool in its echo from reverberant caverns; even through the blinding dark her skull-face gleamed, the cobwebbed eyes lurid in the depths of their clinging shadows with a light that glowed from deep within the leprosy-white skull. The witch was laughing.

"O fool!" she lilted in a hollow ripple of scorn as cool as caverns underground. "Poor, presumptuous fool! Did you really think to bargain with us of the outer worlds? Did you really believe that Pav—*Pav!*—could die? No—in your little human brain how could you have known that all the Romne you saw was illusion, that Pav's human body was no real thing? Blind, hot, earthly woman, with your little hates and vengeances, how could you have reigned queen over a Romne that is Darkness itself—as you see it now? For this roaring night which engulfs you, without dimensions, without form, lightless, inchoate—this is Romne! And Romne is Pav. The land that you walked through, the mountains and plains you saw—all these were no less Pav than the human body he assumed. Nor was his height and black-bearded arrogance any more Pav himself than were the rocks and trees and black waters of Romne. Pav is Romne, and Romne is Pav—one terrible whole out of which all you saw was wrought.

"Yes, shudder, and presently, when I am through with you—die. For no human thing could live in the Romne that is real. When in your foolish vengeance you quenched the flame that burned on the image's head, you sealed your own doom. Only in the power of that flame could the illusion of the land of Romne hold itself steady about you. Only that flame in its tangible light held Romne and Pav in the semblance of reality to you, or kept the weight of the Dark from crushing your puny soul in the soft white flesh you call a body. Only the sound of my voice does it now. When I cease to speak, when the breath of my tomb-breeze ceases to blow around you—then you die."

The cool voice broke into soft and scornful laughter while darkness reeled about Jirel and the roaring was a tumult unbearable in her very brain. Was it indeed the voice of what had been Pav? Then the low, chill voice echoed on,

"But before you die I would have you look upon what you sought to slay. I would have you *see* the Darkness that is

Pav and Romne, clearly and visibly, so that you might understand what manner of lover I had. And you thought to rival me! Do you think, in your pride of human endurance, you could so much as gaze for one instant upon the inferno that is—Pav!"

In that one ringing word the chill wind ceased, the voice echoed into silence from its heights of scorn, and in the darkness, black upon the black, with no sense that human flesh possesses—neither sight nor hearing nor touch—yet with hideous clarity, she saw.

She saw the Darkness. It was tremendous beyond the power of any human perceptions to endure save in the brief flash she had of it. A thunderous Darkness whose roar was vaster than anything like mere sound. The inferno of it was too hot to bear. The human Pav's eyes had blazed like black suns, intolerably, but that had been only a reflection of this infinite might. This Darkness was the incarnate blaze, and all her consciousness reeled and was in agony before it.

She thought she could not endure to look—even to exist so near to that terrible heat of darkness, but no closing of eyes could shut it out. In the fleeting instant while she saw—through closed eyes and numbed senses, conscious in every fiber of the blaze so close—a vibration from the great Thing that was beyond shape and size and matter shivered through her in a scorch of heat too hot to touch her flesh, though her soul shuddered fainting away. It was not anything like a voice, but there was intelligence in it. And in her brain she received dimly what it said.

"Sorry—would have had you—could have loved you—but go now—go instantly, before you die. . . ."

And somehow, in a way that left her mind blank with the tremendous power of it, that infinite force was commanding obedience even out of the stunning Dark. For the Darkness was Romne, and Romne was Pav, and the command ran like a shudder of dark lightning from edge to edge, expelling her from its heart in an explosion of black inferno.

Instantly, blindingly, in the numbing shock of that thunderous power, the darkness ceased to engulf her. Light in a dazzle that stunned her very brain burst all around. She was spun by forces so mighty that their very tremendousness saved her from destruction, as an insect might pass unharmed through a tornado. Infinity was a whirlpool around her, and——

FLAGSTONES pressed cool and smooth against her bare feet. She blinked dizzily. Joiry's chapel walls were rising grayly about her, familiar and dun in the dim light of dawn. She stood here in her doeskin tunic upon the flagstones and breathed in deep gusts, staring about her with dazed eyes that dwelt like lingering caresses upon the familiar things of home.

The Hour of the Dragon

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A stirring and vivid weird story about a barbarian adventurer who made himself a king, and the strange talismanic jewel that was known as the Heart of Ahriman

The Story Thus Far

CONAN, a barbarian adventurer who has made himself king of Aquilonia, finds himself pitted against Xaltotun, an ancient sorcerer and adept of black magic who has been dead for three thousand years. The priests who poisoned Xaltotun had mummified his body with their dark arts, keeping all his organs intact. He is revived by means of a flaming jewel, known as the Heart of Ahriman, which had been stolen from the wizard during his life.

With Xaltotun's aid, the conspirators who had brought him back from death place Tarascus on the throne of Nemedia and invade Aquilonia in an attempt to overthrow Conan and make Valerius king of Aquilonia in his place. Xaltotun causes the cliffs to fall on Conan's army and captures Conan, who is mourned as dead by his countrymen. Valerius ascends the throne of Aquilonia.

Xaltotun confines Conan, heavily chained, in the dungeons of horror beneath his palace in Belverus, capital city of Nemedia, from which he is rescued after a weird and gruesome adventure, by Zenobia, a girl of the king's seraglio, who had fallen in love with him when she saw him from a distance on his visit to the Nemedian king the year before.

The story continues:

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6. *The Thrust of a Knife*

CONAN stooped and tore the knife from the monster's breast. Then he went swiftly up the stair. What other shapes of fear the darkness held he could not guess, but he had no desire to encounter any more. This touch-and-go sort of battling was too strenuous even for the giant Cimmerian. The moonlight was fading from the floor, the darkness closing in, and something like panic pursued him up the stair. He breathed a gusty sigh of relief when he reached the head, and felt the third key turn in the lock. He opened the door slightly, and craned his neck to peer through, half expecting an attack from some human or bestial enemy.

He looked into a bare stone corridor, dimly lighted, and a slender, supple figure stood before the door.

"Your Majesty!" It was a low, vibrant cry, half in relief and half in fear. The girl sprang to his side, then hesitated as if abashed.

"You bleed," she said. "You have been hurt!"

He brushed aside the implication with an impatient hand.

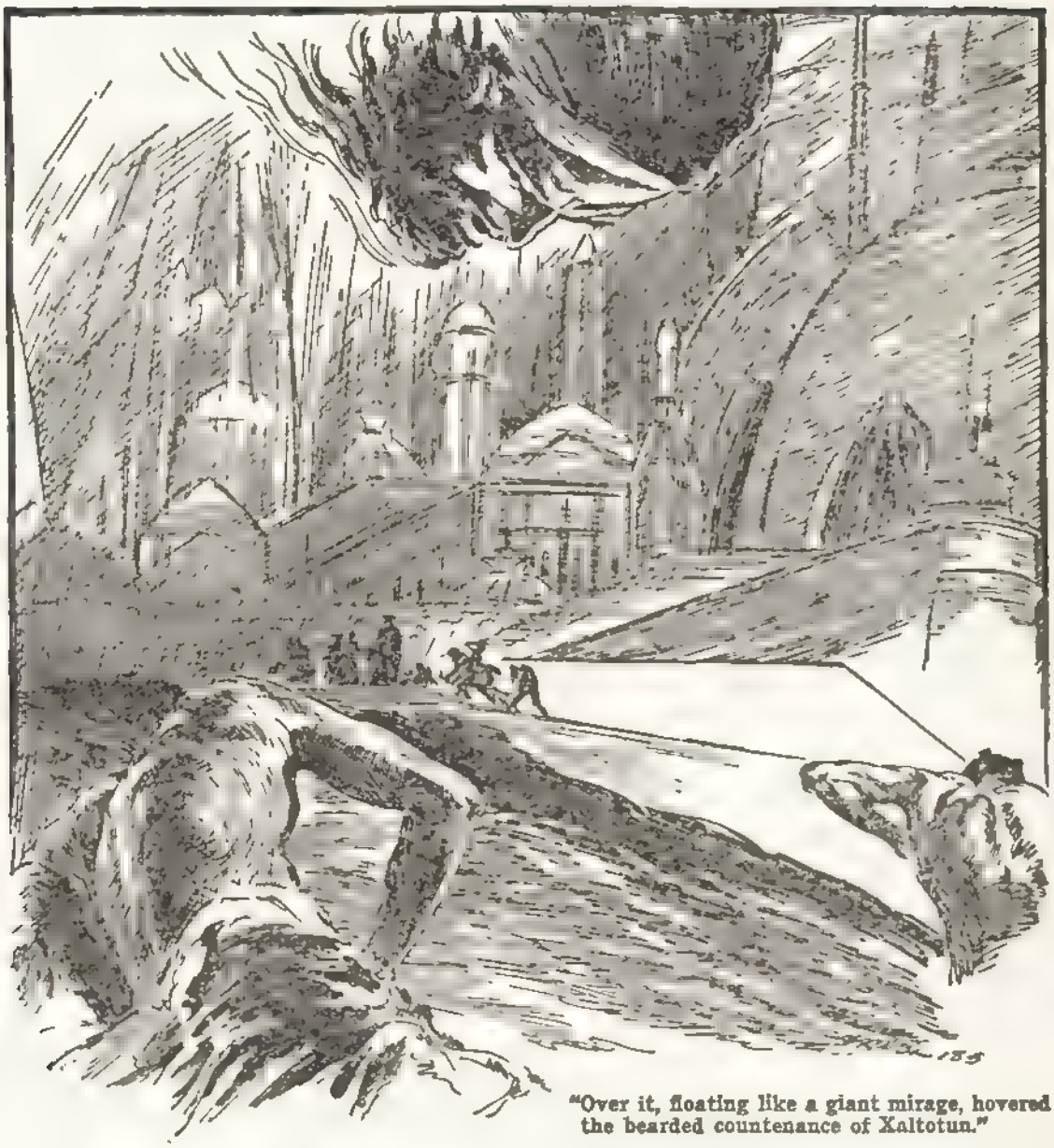
"Scratches that wouldn't hurt a baby. Your skewer came in handy, though. But for it Tarascus's monkey would be cracking my shin-bones for the marrow right now. But what now?"

"Follow me," she whispered. "I will lead you outside the city wall. I have a horse concealed there."

She turned to lead the way down the corridor, but he laid a heavy hand on her naked shoulder.

"Walk beside me," he instructed her softly, passing his massive arm about her

This story begun in WEIRD TALES for December



"Over it, floating like a giant mirage, hovered the bearded countenance of Xaltotun."

lithe waist. "You've played me fair so far, and I'm inclined to believe in you; but I've lived this long only because I've trusted no one too far, man or woman. So! Now if you play me false you won't live to enjoy the jest."

She did not flinch at sight of the reddened poniard or the contact of his hard muscles about her supple body.

"Cut me down without mercy if I play you false," she answered. "The very feel of your arm about me, even in menace, is as the fulfillment of a dream."

The vaulted corridor ended at a door, which she opened. Outside lay another black man, a giant in turban and silk loincloth, with a curved sword lying on the flags near his hand. He did not move.

"I drugged his wine," she whispered, swerving to avoid the recumbent figure. "He is the last, and outer, guard of the pits. None ever escaped from them be-

fore, and none has ever wished to seek them; so only these black men guard them. Only these of all the servants knew it was King Conan that Xaltotun brought a prisoner in his chariot. I was watching, sleepless, from an upper casement that opened into the court, while the other girls slept; for I knew that a battle was being fought, or had been fought, in the west, and I feared for you. . . .

"I saw the blacks carry you up the stair, and I recognized you in the torchlight. I slipped into this wing of the palace tonight, in time to see them carry you to the pits. I had not dared come here before nightfall. You must have lain in drugged senselessness all day in Xaltotun's chamber.

"Oh, let us be wary! Strange things are afoot in the palace tonight. The slaves said that Xaltotun slept as he often sleeps, drugged by the lotus of Stygia, but Tarascus is in the palace. He entered secretly, through the postern, wrapped in his cloak which was dusty as with long travel, and attended only by his squire, the lean silent Arideus. I cannot understand, but I am afraid."

THEY came out at the foot of a narrow, winding stair, and mounting it, passed through a narrow panel which she slid aside. When they had passed through, she slipped it back in place, and it became merely a portion of the ornate wall. They were in a more spacious corridor, carpeted and tapestried, over which hanging lamps shed a golden glow.

Conan listened intently, but he heard no sound throughout the palace. He did not know in what part of the palace he was, or in which direction lay the chamber of Xaltotun. The girl was trembling as she drew him along the corridor, to halt presently beside an alcove masked with satin tapestry. Drawing this aside, she motioned for him to step into the niche, and whispered: "Wait here! Beyond that door at the end of the corridor we are likely to meet slaves or eunuchs at any time of the day or night. I will go and see if the way is clear, before we essay it."

Instantly his hair-trigger suspicions were aroused.

"Are you leading me into a trap?"

Tears sprang into her dark eyes. She sank to her knees and seized his muscular hand.

"Oh, my king, do not mistrust me now!" Her voice shook with desperate urgency. "If you doubt and hesitate, we are lost! Why should I bring you up out of the pits to betray you now?"

"All right," he muttered. "I'll trust you; though, by Crom, the habits of a lifetime are not easily put aside. Yet I wouldn't harm you now, if you brought all the swordsmen in Nemedia upon me. But for you Tarascus's cursed ape would have come upon me in chains and unarmed. Do as you wish, girl."

Kissing his hands, she sprang lithely up and ran down the corridor, to vanish through a heavy double door.

He glanced after her, wondering if he was a fool to trust her; then he shrugged his mighty shoulders and pulled the satin hangings together, masking his refuge. It was not strange that a passionate young beauty should be risking her life to aid him; such things had happened often enough in his life. Many women had looked on him with favor, in the days of his wanderings, and in the time of his kingship.

Yet he did not remain motionless in the alcove, waiting for her return. Following his instincts, he explored the niche for another exit, and presently found one—the opening of a narrow passage, masked by the tapestries, that ran

to an ornately carved door, barely visible in the dim light that filtered in from the outer corridor. And as he stared into it, somewhere beyond that carven door he heard the sound of another door opening and shutting, and then a low mumble of voices. The familiar sound of one of those voices caused a sinister expression to cross his dark face. Without hesitation he glided down the passage, and crouched like a stalking panther beside the door. It was not locked, and manipulating it delicately, he pushed it open a crack, with a reckless disregard for possible consequences that only he could have explained or defended.

It was masked on the other side by tapestries, but through a thin slit in the velvet he looked into a chamber lit by a candle on an ebony table. There were two men in that chamber. One was a scarred, sinister-looking ruffian in leather breeks and ragged cloak; the other was Tarascus, king of Nemedia.

Tarascus seemed ill at ease. He was slightly pale, and he kept starting and glancing about him, as if expecting and fearing to hear some sound or footstep.

"Go swiftly and at once," he was saying. "*He* is deep in drugged slumber, but I know not when he may awaken."

"Strange to hear words of fear issuing from the lips of Tarascus," rumbled the other in a harsh, deep voice.

The king frowned.

"I fear no common man, as you well know. But when I saw the cliffs fall at Valkia I knew that this devil we had resurrected was no charlatan. I fear his powers, because I do not know the full extent of them. But I know that somehow they are connected with this accursed thing which I have stolen from him. It brought him back to life; so it must be the source of his sorcery.

"He had it hidden well; but following my secret order a slave spied on him and saw him place it in a golden chest, and saw where he hid the chest. Even so, I would not have dared steal it had Xaltotun himself not been sunk in lotus slumber.

"I believe it is the secret of his power. With it Orastes brought him back to life. With it he will make us all slaves, if we are not wary. So take it and cast it into the sea as I have bidden you. And be sure you are so far from land that neither tide nor storm can wash it up on the beach. You have been paid."

"So I have," grunted the ruffian. "And I owe more than gold to you, king; I owe you a debt of gratitude. Even thieves can be grateful."

"Whatever debt you may feel you owe me," answered Tarascus, "will be paid when you have hurled this thing into the sea."

"I'll ride for Zingara and take ship from Kordava," promised the other. "I dare not show my head in Argos, because of the matter of a murder or so——"

"I care not, so it is done. Here it is; a horse awaits you in the court. Go, and go swiftly!"

SOMETHING passed between them, something that flamed like living fire. Conan had only a brief glimpse of it; and then the ruffian pulled a slouch hat over his eyes, drew his cloak about his shoulder, and hurried from the chamber. And as the door closed behind him, Conan moved with the devastating fury of unchained blood-lust. He had held himself in check as long as he could. The sight of his enemy so near him set his wild blood seething and swept away all caution and restraint.

Tarascus was turning toward an inner door when Conan tore aside the hangings and leaped like a blood-mad panther into the room. Tarascus wheeled, but even before he could recognize his at-

tacker, Conan's poniard ripped into him.

But the blow was not mortal, as Conan knew the instant he struck. His foot had caught in a fold of the curtains and tripped him as he leaped. The point fleshed itself in Tarascus's shoulder and plowed down along his ribs, and the king of Nemedia screamed.

The impact of the blow and Conan's lunging body hurled him back against the table and it toppled and the candle went out. They were both carried to the floor by the violence of Conan's rush, and the foot of the tapestry hampered them both in its folds. Conan was stabbing blindly in the dark, Tarascus screaming in a frenzy of panicky terror. As if fear lent him superhuman energy, Tarascus tore free and blundered away in the darkness, shrieking: "Help! Guards! Arideus! Orastes! *Orastes!*"

Conan rose, kicking himself free of the tangling tapestries and the broken table, cursing with the bitterness of his blood-thirsty disappointment. He was confused, and ignorant of the plan of the palace. The yells of Tarascus were still resounding in the distance, and a wild outcry was bursting forth in answer. The Nemedian had escaped him in the darkness, and Conan did not know which way he had gone. The Cimmerian's rash stroke for vengeance had failed, and there remained only the task of saving his own hide if he could.

Swearing luridly, Conan ran back down the passage and into the alcove, glaring out into the lighted corridor, just as Zenobia came running up it, her dark eyes dilated with terror.

"Oh, what has happened?" she cried. "The palace is roused! I swear I have not betrayed you——"

"No, it was I who stirred up this hornet's nest," he grunted. "I tried to pay off a score. What's the shortest way out of this?"

She caught his wrist and ran fleetly down the corridor. But before they reached the heavy door at the other end, muffled shouts arose from behind it and the portals began to shake under an assault from the other side. Zenobia wrung her hands and whimpered.

"We are cut off! I locked that door as I returned through it. But they will burst it in a moment. The way to the postern gate lies through it."

Conan wheeled. Up the corridor, though still out of sight, he heard a rising clamor that told him his foes were behind as well as before him.

"Quick! Into this door!" the girl cried desperately, running across the corridor and throwing open the door of a chamber.

Conan followed her through, and then threw the gold catch behind them. They stood in an ornately furnished chamber, empty but for themselves, and she drew him to a gold-barred window, through which he saw trees and shrubbery.

"You are strong," she panted. "If you can tear these bars away, you may yet escape. The garden is full of guards, but the shrubs are thick, and you may avoid them. The southern wall is also the outer wall of the city. Once over that, you have a chance to get away. A horse is hidden for you in a thicket beside the road that runs westward, a few hundred paces to the south of the fountain of Thrallos. You know where it is?"

"Aye! But what of you? I had meant to take you with me."

A flood of joy lighted her beautiful face.

"Then my cup of happiness is brimming! But I will not hamper your escape. Burdened with me you would fail. Nay, do not fear for me. They will never suspect that I aided you willingly. Go! What you have just said will glorify my life throughout the long years."

He caught her up in his iron arms, crushed her slim, vibrant figure to him and kissed her fiercely on eyes, cheeks, throat and lips, until she lay panting in his embrace; gusty and tempestuous as a storm-wind, even his love-making was violent.

"I'll go," he muttered. "But by Crom, I'll come for you some day!"

Wheeling, he gripped the gold bars and tore them from their sockets with one tremendous wrench; threw a leg over the sill and went down swiftly, clinging to the ornaments on the wall. He hit the ground running and melted like a shadow into the maze of towering rose-bushes and spreading trees. The one look he cast back over his shoulder showed him Zenobia leaning over the window-sill, her arms stretched after him in mute farewell and renunciation.

GUARDS were running through the garden, all converging toward the palace, where the clamor momentarily grew louder—tall men, in burnished cuirasses and crested helmets of polished bronze. The starlight struck glints from their gleaming armor, among the trees, betraying their every movement; but the sound of their coming ran far before them. To Conan, wilderness-bred, their rush through the shrubbery was like the blundering stampede of cattle. Some of them passed within a few feet of where he lay flat in a thick cluster of bushes, and never guessed his presence. With the palace as their goal, they were oblivious to all else about them. When they had gone shouting on, he rose and fled through the garden with no more noise than a panther would have made.

So quickly he came to the southern wall, and mounted the steps that led to the parapet. The wall was made to keep people out, not in. No sentry patrolling the battlements was in sight. Crouching by an embrasure he glanced back at the great palace rearing above the cypresses behind him. Lights blazed from every window, and he could see figures flitting back and forth across them like puppets on invisible strings. He grinned hardly, shook his fist in a gesture of farewell and menace, and let himself over the outer rim of the parapet.

A low tree, a few yards below the parapet, received Conan's weight, as he dropped noiselessly into the branches. An instant later he was racing through the shadows with the swinging hillman's stride that eats up long miles.

Gardens and pleasure villas surrounded the walls of Belverus. Drowsy slaves, sleeping by their watchman's pikes, did not see the swift and furtive figure that scaled walls, crossed alleys made by the arching branches of trees, and threaded a noiseless way through orchards and vineyards. Watch-dogs woke and lifted their deep-booming clamor at a gliding shadow, half scented, half sensed, and then it was gone.

IN A chamber of the palace Tarascus writhed and cursed on a blood-spattered couch, under the deft, quick fingers of Orastes. The palace was thronged with wide-eyed, trembling servitors, but the chamber where the king lay was empty save for himself and the renegade priest.

"Are you sure he still sleeps?" Tarascus demanded again, setting his teeth against the bite of the herb juices with which Orastes was bandaging the long, ragged gash in his shoulder and ribs. "Ishtar, Mitra and Set! That burns like the molten pitch of hell!"

"Which you would be experiencing even now, but for your good fortune," remarked Orastes. "Whoever wielded that knife struck to kill. Yes, I have told you that Xaltotun still sleeps. Why

are you so urgent upon that point? What has he to do with this?"

"You know nothing of what has passed in the palace tonight?" Tarascus searched the priest's countenance with burning intensity.

"Nothing. As you know, I have been employed in translating manuscripts for Xaltotun, for some months now, transcribing esoteric volumes written in the younger languages into script he can read. He was well versed in all the tongues and scripts of his day, but he has not yet learned all the newer languages, and to save time he has me translate these works for him, to learn if any new knowledge has been discovered since his time. I did not know that he had returned last night until he sent for me and told me of the battle. Then I returned to my studies, nor did I know that you had returned until the clamor in the palace brought me out of my cell."

"Then you do not know that Xaltotun brought the king of Aquilonia a captive to this palace?"

Orastes shook his head, without particular surprize.

"Xaltotun merely said that Conan would oppose us no more. I supposed that he had fallen, but did not ask the details."

"Xaltotun saved his life when I would have slain him," snarled Tarascus. "I saw his purpose instantly. He would hold Conan captive to use as a club against us — against Amalric, against Valerius, and against myself. So long as Conan lives he is a threat, a unifying factor for Aquilonia, that might be used to compel us into courses we would not otherwise follow. I mistrust this undead Pythonian. Of late I have begun to fear him.

"I followed him, some hours after he had departed eastward. I wished to learn what he intended doing with Conan. I found that he had imprisoned him in the pits. I intended to see that the barbarian died, in spite of Xaltotun. And I accomplished——"

A cautious knock sounded at the door.

"That's Arideus," grunted Tarascus. "Let him in."

The saturnine squire entered, his eyes blazing with suppressed excitement.

"How, Arideus?" exclaimed Tarascus. "Have you found the man who attacked me?"

"You did not see him, my lord?" asked Arideus, as one who would assure himself of a fact he already knows to exist. "You did not recognize him?"

"No. It happened so quick, and the candle was out—all I could think of was that it was some devil loosed on me by Xaltotun's magic——"

"The Pythonian sleeps in his barred and bolted room. But I have been in the pits." Arideus twitched his lean shoulders excitedly.

"Well, speak, man!" exclaimed Tarascus impatiently. "What did you find there?"

"An empty dungeon," whispered the squire. "The corpse of the great ape!"

"What?" Tarascus started upright, and blood gushed from his opened wound.

"Aye! The man-eater is dead—stabbed through the heart—and Conan is gone!"

Tarascus was gray of face as he mechanically allowed Orastes to force him prostrate again and the priest renewed work upon his mangled flesh.

"Conan!" he repeated. "Not a crushed corpse—escaped! Mitra! He is no man, but a devil himself! I thought Xaltotun was behind this wound. I see now. Gods and devils! It was Conan who stabbed me! Arideus!"

"Aye, your Majesty!"

"Search every nook in the palace. He may be skulking through the dark corridors now like a hungry tiger. Let no

niche escape your scrutiny, and beware. It is not a civilized man you hunt, but a blood-mad barbarian whose strength and ferocity are those of a wild beast. Scour the palace-grounds and the city. Throw a cordon about the walls. If you find he has escaped from the city, as he may well do, take a troop of horsemen and follow him. Once past the walls it will be like hunting a wolf through the hills. But haste, and you may yet catch him."

"This is a matter which requires more than ordinary human wits," said Orastes. "Perhaps we should seek Xaltotun's advice."

"No!" exclaimed Tarascus violently. "Let the troopers pursue Conan and slay him. Xaltotun can hold no grudge against us if we kill a prisoner to prevent his escape."

"Well," said Orastes, "I am no Acheronian, but I am versed in some of the arts, and the control of certain spirits which have cloaked themselves in material substance. Perhaps I can aid you in this matter."

THE fountain of Thrallos stood in a clustered ring of oaks beside the road a mile from the walls of the city. Its musical tinkle reached Conan's ears through the silence of the starlight. He drank deep of its icy stream, and then hurried southward toward a small, dense thicket he saw there. Rounding it, he saw a great white horse tied among the bushes. Heaving a deep gusty sigh he reached it with one stride—a mocking laugh brought him about, glaring.

A dully glinting, mail-clad figure moved out of the shadows into the starlight. This was no plumed and burnished palace guardsman. It was a tall man in morion and gray chain-mail—one of the Adventurers, a class of warriors peculiar to Nemedia; men who had not attained to the wealth and position of knighthood, or had fallen from that estate; hard-bitten fighters, dedicating their lives to war and adventure. They constituted a class of their own, sometimes commanding troops, but themselves accountable to no man but the king. Conan knew that he could have been discovered by no more dangerous a foeman.

A quick glance among the shadows convinced him that the man was alone, and he expanded his great chest slightly, digging his toes into the turf, as his thews coiled tensely.

"I was riding for Belverus on Amalric's business," said the Adventurer, advancing warily. The starlight was a long sheen on the great two-handed sword he bore naked in his hand. "A horse whinnied to mine from the thicket. I investigated and thought it strange a steed should be tethered here. I waited —and lo, I have caught a rare prize!"

The Adventurers lived by their swords.

"I know you," muttered the Nemedian. "You are Conan, king of Aquilonia. I thought I saw you die in the valley of the Valkia, but——"

Conan sprang as a dying tiger springs. Practised fighter though the Adventurer was, he did not realize the desperate quickness that lurks in barbaric sinews. He was caught off guard, his heavy sword half lifted. Before he could either strike or parry, the king's poniard sheathed itself in his throat, above the gorget, slanting downward into his heart. With a choked gurgle he reeled and went down, and Conan ruthlessly tore his blade free as his victim fell. The white horse snorted violently and shied at the sight and scent of blood on the sward.

Glaring down at his lifeless enemy, dripping poniard in hand, sweat glistening on his broad breast, Conan poised like a statue, listening intently. In the woods about there was no sound, save for the sleepy cheep of awakened birds.

But in the city, a mile away, he heard the strident blare of a trumpet.

Hastily he bent over the fallen man. A few seconds' search convinced him that whatever message the man might have borne was intended to be conveyed by word of mouth. But he did not pause in his task. It was not many hours until dawn. A few minutes later the white horse was galloping westward along the white road, and the rider wore the gray mail of a Nemedian Adventurer.

7. *The Rending of the Veil*

CONAN knew his only chance of escape lay in speed. He did not even consider hiding somewhere near Belverus until the chase passed on; he was certain that the uncanny ally of Tarascus would be able to ferret him out. Besides, he was not one to skulk and hide; an open fight or an open chase, either suited his temperament better. He had a long start, he knew. He would lead them a grinding race for the border.

Zenobia had chosen well in selecting the white horse. His speed, toughness and endurance were obvious. The girl knew weapons and horses, and, Conan reflected with some satisfaction, she knew men. He rode westward at a gait that ate up the miles.

It was a sleeping land through which he rode, past grove-sheltered villages and white-walled villas amid spacious fields and orchards that grew sparser as he fared westward. As the villages thinned, the land grew more rugged, and the keeps that frowned from eminences told of centuries of border war. But none rode down from those castles to challenge or halt him. The lords of the keeps were following the banner of Amalric; the pennons that were wont to wave over these towers were now floating over the Aquilonian plains.

When the last huddled village fell behind him, Conan left the road, which was beginning to bend toward the northwest, toward the distant passes. To keep to the road would mean to pass by border towers, still garrisoned with armed men who would not allow him to pass unquestioned. He knew there would be no patrols riding the border marches on either side, as in ordinary times, but there were those towers, and with dawn there would probably be cavalcades of returning soldiers with wounded men in oxcarts.

This road from Belverus was the only road that crossed the border for fifty miles from north to south. It followed a series of passes through the hills, and on either hand lay a wide expanse of wild, sparsely inhabited mountains. He maintained his due westerly direction, intending to cross the border deep in the wilds of the hills that lay to the south of the passes. It was a shorter route, more arduous, but safer for a hunted fugitive. One man on a horse could traverse country an army would find impassable.

But at dawn he had not reached the hills; they were a long, low, blue rampart stretching along the horizon ahead of him. Here there were neither farms nor villages, no white-walled villas looming among clustering trees. The dawn wind stirred the tall stiff grass, and there was nothing but the long rolling swells of brown earth, covered with dry grass, and in the distance the gaunt walls of a stronghold on a low hill. Too many Aquilonian raiders had crossed the mountains in not too-distant days for the countryside to be thickly settled as it was farther to the east.

Dawn ran like a prairie fire across the grasslands, and high overhead sounded a weird crying as a straggling wedge of wild geese winged swiftly southward. In a grassy swale Conan halted and un-

saddled his mount. Its sides were heaving, its coat plastered with sweat. He had pushed it unmercifully through the hours before dawn.

While it munched the brittle grass and rolled, he lay at the crest of the low slope, staring eastward. Far away to the northward he could see the road he had left, streaming like a white ribbon over a distant rise. No black dots moved along that glistening ribbon. There was no sign about the castle in the distance to indicate that the keepers had noticed the lone wayfarer.

An hour later the land still stretched bare. The only sign of life was a glint of steel on the far-off battlements, a raven in the sky that wheeled backward and forth, dipping and rising as if seeking something. Conan saddled and rode westward at a more leisurely gait.

As he topped the farther crest of the slope, a raucous screaming burst out over his head, and looking up, he saw the raven flapping high above him, cawing incessantly. As he rode on, it followed him, maintaining its position and making the morning hideous with its strident cries, heedless of his efforts to drive it away.

This kept up for hours, until Conan's teeth were on edge, and he felt that he would give half his kingdom to be allowed to wring that black neck.

"Devils of hell!" he roared in futile rage, shaking his mailed fist at the frantic bird. "Why do you harry me with your squawking? Begone, you black spawn of perdition, and peck for wheat in the farmers' fields!"

He was ascending the first pitch of the hills, and he seemed to hear an echo of the bird's clamor far behind him. Turning in his saddle, he presently made out another black dot hanging in the blue. Beyond that again he caught the glint of the afternoon sun on steel. That could mean only one thing: armed men. And they were not riding along the beaten road, which was out of his sight beyond the horizon. They were following him.

His face grew grim and he shivered slightly as he stared at the raven that wheeled high above him.

"So it is more than the whim of a brainless beast?" he muttered. "Those riders cannot see you, spawn of hell; but the other bird can see you, and they can see him. You follow me, he follows you, and they follow him. Are you only a craftily trained feathered creature, or some devil in the form of a bird? Did Xaltotun set you on my trail? Are *you* Xaltotun?"

Only a strident screech answered him, a screech vibrating with harsh mockery.

CONAN wasted no more breath on his dusky betrayer. Grimly he settled to the long grind of the hills. He dared not push the horse too hard; the rest he had allowed it had not been enough to freshen it. He was still far ahead of his pursuers, but they would cut down that lead steadily. It was almost a certainty that their horses were fresher than his, for they had undoubtedly changed mounts at that castle he had passed.

The going grew rougher, the scenery more rugged, steep grassy slopes pitching up to densely timbered mountainsides. Here, he knew, he might elude his hunters, but for that hellish bird that squalled incessantly above him. He could not longer see them in this broken country, but he was certain that they still followed him, guided unerringly by their feathered allies. That black shape became like a demoniac incubus, hounding him through measureless hells. The stones he hurled with a curse went wide or fell harmless, though in his youth he had felled hawks on the wing.

The horse was tiring fast. Conan

recognized the grim finality of his position. He sensed an inexorable driving fate behind all this. He could not escape. He was as much a captive as he had been in the pits of Belverus. But he was no son of the Orient to yield passively to what seemed inevitable. If he could not escape, he would at least take some of his foes into eternity with him. He turned into a wide thicket of larches that masked a slope, looking for a place to turn at bay.

Then ahead of him there rang a strange, shrill scream, human yet weirdly timbred. An instant later he had pushed through a screen of branches, and saw the source of that eldritch cry. In a small glade below him four soldiers in Nemedian chain-mail were binding a noose about the neck of a gaunt old woman in peasant garb. A heap of fagots, bound with cord on the ground near by, showed what her occupation had been when surprized by these stragglers.

Conan felt slow fury swell his heart as he looked silently down and saw the ruffians dragging her toward a tree whose low-spreading branches were obviously intended to act as a gibbet. He had crossed the frontier an hour ago. He was standing on his own soil, watching the murder of one of his own subjects. The old woman was struggling with surprizing strength and energy, and as he watched, she lifted her head and voiced again the strange, weird, far-carrying call he had heard before. It was echoed as if in mockery by the raven flapping above the trees. The soldiers laughed roughly, and one struck her in the mouth.

Conan swung from his weary steed and dropped down the face of the rocks, landing with a clang of mail on the grass. The four men wheeled at the sound and drew their swords, gaping at the mailed giant who faced them, sword in hand.

Conan laughed harshly. His eyes were bleak as flint.

"Dogs!" he said without passion and without mercy. "Do Nemedian jackals set themselves up as executioners and hang my subjects at will? First you must take the head of their king. Here I stand, awaiting your lordly pleasure!"

The soldiers stared at him uncertainly as he strode toward them.

"Who is this madman?" growled a bearded ruffian. "He wears Nemedian mail, but speaks with an Aquilonian accent."

"No matter," quoth another. "Cut him down, and then we'll hang the old hag."

And so saying he ran at Conan, lifting his sword. But before he could strike, the king's great blade lashed down, splitting helmet and skull. The man fell before him, but the others were hardy rogues. They gave tongue like wolves and surged about the lone figure in the gray mail, and the clamor and din of steel drowned the cries of the circling raven.

Conan did not shout. His eyes coals of blue fire and his lips smiling bleakly, he lashed right and left with his two-handed sword. For all his size he was quick as a cat on his feet, and he was constantly in motion, presenting a moving target so that thrusts and swings cut empty air oftener than not. Yet when he struck he was perfectly balanced, and his blows fell with devastating power. Three of the four were down, dying in their own blood, and the fourth was bleeding from half a dozen wounds, stumbling in headlong retreat as he parried frantically, when Conan's spur caught in the surcoat of one of the fallen men.

The king stumbled, and before he could catch himself the Nemedian, with the frenzy of desperation, rushed him so savagely that Conan staggered and fell sprawling over the corpse. The Neme-

dian croaked in triumph and sprang forward, lifting his great sword with both hands over his right shoulder, as he braced his legs wide for the stroke—and then, over the prostrate king, something huge and hairy shot like a thunderbolt full on the soldier's breast, and his yelp of triumph changed to a shriek of death.

Conan, scrambling up, saw the man lying dead with his throat torn out, and a great gray wolf stood over him, head sunk as it smelt the blood that formed a pool on the grass.

THE king turned as the old woman spoke to him. She stood straight and tall before him, and in spite of her ragged garb, her features, clear-cut and aquiline, and her keen black eyes, were not those of a common peasant woman. She called to the wolf and it trotted to her side like a great dog and rubbed its giant shoulder against her knee, while it gazed at Conan with great green lambent eyes. Absently she laid her hand upon its mighty neck, and so the two stood regarding the king of Aquilonia. He found their steady gaze disquieting, though there was no hostility in it.

"Men say King Conan died beneath the stones and dirt when the cliffs crumbled by Valkia," she said in a deep, strong, resonant voice.

"So they say," he growled. He was in no mood for controversy, and he thought of those armored riders who were pushing nearer every moment. The raven above him cawed stridently, and he cast an involuntary glare upward, grinding his teeth in a spasm of nervous irritation.

Up on the ledge the white horse stood with drooping head. The old woman looked at it, and then at the raven; and then she lifted a strange weird cry as she had before. As if recognizing the call, the raven wheeled, suddenly mute, and raced eastward. But before it had got out of sight, the shadow of mighty wings fell across it. An eagle soared up from the tangle of trees, and rising above it, swooped and struck the black messenger to the earth. The strident voice of betrayal was stilled for ever.

"Crom!" muttered Conan, staring at the old woman. "Are you a magician, too?"

"I am Zelata," she said. "The people of the valleys call me a witch. Was that child of the night guiding armed men on your trail?"

"Aye." She did not seem to think the answer fantastic. "They cannot be far behind me."

"Lead your horse and follow me, King Conan," she said briefly.

Without comment he mounted the rocks and brought his horse down to the glade by a circuitous path. As he came he saw the eagle reappear, dropping lazily down from the sky, and rest an instant on Zelata's shoulder, spreading its great wings lightly so as not to crush her with its weight.

Without a word she led the way, the great wolf trotting at her side, the eagle soaring above her. Through deep thickets and along tortuous ledges poised over deep ravines she led him, and finally along a narrow precipice-edged path to a curious dwelling of stone, half hut, half cavern, beneath a cliff hidden among the gorges and crags. The eagle flew to the pinnacle of this cliff, and perched there like a motionless sentinel.

Still silent, Zelata stabled the horse in a near-by cave, with leaves and grass piled high for provender, and a tiny spring bubbling in the dim recesses.

In the hut she seated the king on a rude, hide-covered bench, and she herself sat upon a low stool before the tiny fireplace, while she made a fire of tamarisk chunks and prepared a frugal meal. The great wolf drowsed beside her, facing

the fire, his huge head sunk on his paws, his ears twitching in his dreams.

"You do not fear to sit in the hut of a witch?" she asked, breaking her silence at last.

An impatient shrug of his gray-mailed shoulders was her guest's only reply. She gave into his hands a wooden dish heaped with dried fruits, cheese and barley bread, and a great pot of the heady upland beer, brewed from barley grown in the high valleys.

"I have found the brooding silence of the glens more pleasing than the babble of city streets," she said. "The children of the wild are kinder than the children of men." Her hand briefly stroked the ruff of the sleeping wolf. "My children were afar from me today, or I had not needed your sword, my king. They were coming at my call."

"What grudge had those Nemedian dogs against you?" Conan demanded.

"Skulkers from the invading army straggle all over the countryside, from the frontier to Tarantia," she answered. "The foolish villagers in the valleys told them that I had a store of gold hidden away, so as to divert their attentions from their villages. They demanded treasure from me, and my answers angered them. But neither skulkers nor the men who pursue you, nor any raven will find you here."

He shook his head, eating ravenously. "I'm for Tarantia."

She shook her head.

"You thrust your head into the dragon's jaws. Best seek refuge abroad. The heart is gone from your kingdom."

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "Battles have been lost before, yet wars won. A kingdom is not lost by a single defeat."

"And you will go to Tarantia?"

"Aye. Prospero will be holding it against Amalric."

"Are you sure?"

"Hell's devils, woman!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "What else?"

She shook her head. "I feel that it is otherwise. Let us see. Not lightly is the veil rent; yet I will rend it a little, and show you your capital city."

CONAN did not see what she cast upon the fire, but the wolf whimpered in his dreams, and a green smoke gathered and billowed up into the hut. And as he watched, the walls and ceiling of the hut seemed to widen, to grow remote and vanish, merging with infinite immensities; the smoke rolled about him, blotting out everything. And in it forms moved and faded, and stood out in startling clarity.

He stared at the familiar towers and streets of Tarantia, where a mob seethed and screamed, and at the same time he was somehow able to see the banners of Nemedia moving inexorably westward through the smoke and flame of a pillaged land. In the great square of Tarantia the frantic throng milled and yammered, screaming that the king was dead, that the barons were girding themselves to divide the land between them, and that the rule of a king, even of Valerius, was better than anarchy. Prospero, shining in his armor, rode among them, trying to pacify them, bidding them trust Count Trocero, urging them to man the wall and aid his knights in defending the city. They turned on him, shrieking with fear and unreasoning rage, howling that he was Trocero's butcher, a more evil foe than Amalric himself. Offal and stones were hurled at his knights.

A slight blurring of the picture, that might have denoted a passing of time, and then Conan saw Prospero and his knights filing out of the gates and spurring southward. Behind him the city was in an uproar.

"Fools!" muttered Conan thickly. "Fools! Why could they not trust Prospero? Zelata, if you are making game of me, with some trickery——"

"This has passed," answered Zelata imperturbably, though somberly. "It was the evening of the day that has passed when Prospero rode out of Tarantia, with the hosts of Amalric almost within sight. From the walls men saw the flame of their pillaging. So I read it in the smoke. At sunset the Nemedians rode into Tarantia, unopposed. Look! Even now, in the royal hall of Tarantia——"

Abruptly Conan was looking into the great coronation hall. Valerius stood on the regal dais, clad in ermine robes, and Amalric, still in his dusty, blood-stained armor, placed a rich and gleaming circlet on his yellow locks—the crown of Aquilonia! The people cheered; long lines of steel-clad Nemedian warriors looked grimly on, and nobles long in disfavor at Conan's court strutted and swaggered with the emblem of Valerius on their sleeves.

"Crom!" It was an explosive imprecation from Conan's lips as he started up, his great fists clenched into hammers, his veins on his temples knotting, his features convulsed. "A Nemedian placing the crown of Aquilonia on that renegade —in the royal hall of Tarantia!"

As if dispelled by his violence, the smoke faded, and he saw Zelata's black eyes gleaming at him through the mist.

"You have seen—the people of your capital have forfeited the freedom you won for them by sweat and blood; they have sold themselves to the slavers and the butchers. They have shown that they do not trust their destiny. Can you rely upon them for the winning back of your kingdom?"

"They thought I was dead," he grunted, recovering some of his poise. "I have no son. Men can't be governed by a memory. What if the Nemedians have taken Tarantia? There still remain the provinces, the barons, and the people of the countrysides. Valerius has won an empty glory."

"You are stubborn, as befits a fighter. I cannot show you the future, I cannot show you all the past. Nay, *I* show you nothing. I merely make you see windows opened in the veil by powers unguessed. Would you look into the past for a clue of the present?"

"Aye." He seated himself abruptly.

Again the green smoke rose and billowed. Again images unfolded before him, this time alien and seemingly irrelevant. He saw great towering black walls, pedestals half hidden in the shadows upholding images of hideous, half-bestial gods. Men moved in the shadows, dark, wiry men, clad in red, silken loincloths. They were bearing a green jade sarcophagus along a gigantic black corridor. But before he could tell much about what he saw, the scene shifted. He saw a cavern, dim, shadowy and haunted with a strange intangible horror. On an altar of black stone stood a curious golden vessel, shaped like the shell of a scallop. Into this cavern came some of the same dark, wiry men who had borne the mummy-case. They seized the golden vessel, and then the shadows swirled around them and what happened he could not say. But he saw a glimmer in a whorl of darkness, like a ball of living fire. Then the smoke was only smoke, drifting up from the fire of tamarisk chunks, thinning and fading.

"But what does this portend?" he demanded, bewildered. "What I saw in Tarantia I can understand. But what means this glimpse of Zamorian thieves sneaking through a subterranean temple of Set, in Stygia? And that cavern—I've never seen or heard of anything like it, in all my wanderings. If you can show me

that much, these shreds of vision which mean nothing, disjointed, why can you not show me all that is to occur?"

Zelata stirred the fire without replying.

"These things are governed by immutable laws," she said at last. "I can not make you understand; I do not altogether understand myself, though I have sought wisdom in the silences of the high places for more years than I can remember. I cannot save you, though I would if I might. Man must, at last, work out his own salvation. Yet perhaps wisdom may come to me in dreams, and in the morn I may be able to give you the clue to the enigma."

"What enigma?" he demanded.

"The mystery that confronts you, whereby you have lost a kingdom," she answered. And then she spread a sheepskin upon the floor before the hearth. "Sleep," she said briefly.

WITHOUT a word he stretched himself upon it, and sank into restless but deep sleep through which phantoms moved silently and monstrous shapeless shadows crept. Once, limned against a purple sunless horizon, he saw the mighty walls and towers of a great city such as rose nowhere on the waking earth he knew. Its colossal pylons and purple minarets lifted toward the stars, and over it, floating like a giant mirage, hovered the bearded countenance of the man Xaltotun.

Conan woke in the chill whiteness of early dawn, to see Zelata crouched beside the tiny fire. He had not awakened once in the night, and the sound of the great wolf leaving or entering should have roused him. Yet the wolf was there, beside the hearth, with its shaggy coat wet with dew, and with more than dew. Blood glistened wetly amid the thick fell, and there was a cut upon his shoulder.

Zelata nodded, without looking around, as if reading the thoughts of her royal guest.

"He has hunted before dawn, and red was the hunting. I think the man who hunted a king will hunt no more, neither man nor beast."

Conan stared at the great beast with strange fascination as he moved to take the food Zelata offered him.

"When I come to my throne again I won't forget," he said briefly. "You've befriended me—by Crom, I can't remember when I've lain down and slept at the mercy of man or woman as I did last night. But what of the riddle you would read me this morn?"

A long silence ensued, in which the crackle of the tamarisks was loud on the hearth.

"Find the heart of your kingdom," she said at last. "There lies your defeat and your power. You fight more than mortal man. You will not press the throne again unless you find the heart of your kingdom."

"Do you mean the city of Tarantia?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I am but an oracle, through whose lips the gods speak. My lips are sealed by them lest I speak too much. You must find the heart of your kingdom. I can say no more. My lips are opened and sealed by the gods."

DAWN was still white on the peaks when Conan rode westward. A glance back showed him Zelata standing in the door of her hut, inscrutable as ever, the great wolf beside her.

A gray sky arched overhead, and a moaning wind was chill with a promise of winter. Brown leaves fluttered slowly down from the bare branches, sifting upon his mailed shoulders.

All day he pushed through the hills, avoiding roads and villages. Toward

nightfall he began to drop down from the heights, tier by tier, and saw the broad plains of Aquilonia spread out beneath him.

Villages and farms lay close to the foot of the hills on the western side of the mountains, for, for half a century, most of the raiding across the frontier had been done by the Aquilonians. But now only embers and ashes showed where farm huts and villas had stood.

In the gathering darkness Conan rode slowly on. There was little fear of discovery, which he dreaded from friend as well as from foe. The Nemedians had remembered old scores on their westward drive, and Valerius had made no attempt to restrain his allies. He did not count on winning the love of the common people. A vast swath of desolation had been cut through the country from the foothills westward. Conan cursed as he rode over blackened expanses that had been rich fields, and saw the gaunt gable-ends of burned houses jutting against the sky. He moved through an empty and deserted land, like a ghost out of a forgotten and outworn past.

The speed with which the army had traversed the land showed what little resistance it had encountered. Yet had Conan been leading his Aquilonians the invading army would have been forced to buy every foot they gained with their blood. The bitter realization permeated his soul; he was not the representative of a dynasty. He was only a lone adventurer. Even the drop of dynastic blood Valerius boasted had more hold on the minds of men than the memory of Conan and the freedom and power he had given the kingdom.

No pursuers followed him down out of the hills. He watched for wandering or returning Nemedian troops, but met none. Skulkers gave him a wide path, supposing him to be one of the conquerors, what of his harness. Groves and rivers were far more plentiful on the western side of the mountains, and coverts for concealment were not lacking.

So he moved across the pillaged land, halting only to rest his horse, eating frugally of the food Zelata had given him, until, on a dawn when he lay hidden on a river bank where willows and oaks grew thickly, he glimpsed, afar, across the rolling plains dotted with rich groves, the blue and golden towers of Tarantia.

He was no longer in a deserted land, but one teeming with varied life. His progress thenceforth was slow and cautious, through thick woods and unfrequented byways. It was dusk when he reached the plantation of Servius Galannus.

8. *Dying Embers*

THE countryside about Tarantia had escaped the fearful ravaging of the more easterly provinces. There were evidences of the march of a conquering army in broken hedges, plundered fields and looted granaries, but torch and steel had not been loosed wholesale.

There was but one grim splotch on the landscape—a charred expanse of ashes and blackened stone, where, Conan knew, had once stood the stately villa of one of his staunchest supporters.

The king dared not openly approach the Galannus farm, which lay only a few miles from the city. In the twilight he rode through an extensive woodland, until he sighted a keeper's lodge through the trees. Dismounting and tying his horse, he approached the thick, arched door with the intention of sending the keeper after Servius. He did not know what enemies the manor house might be sheltering. He had seen no troops, but they might be quartered all over the

countryside. But as he drew near, he saw the door open and a compact figure in silk hose and richly embroidered doublet stride forth and turn up a path that wound away through the woods.

"Servius!"

At the low call the master of the plantation wheeled with a startled exclamation. His hand flew to the short hunting-sword at his hip, and he recoiled from the tall gray steel figure standing in the dusk before him.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What is your—*Mitra!*"

His breath hissed inward and his ruddy face paled. "Avaunt!" he ejaculated. "Why have you come back from the gray lands of death to terrify me? I was always your true liegeman in your lifetime——"

"As I still expect you to be," answered Conan. "Stop trembling, man; I'm flesh and blood."

Sweating with uncertainty Servius approached and stared into the face of the mail-clad giant, and then, convinced of the reality of what he saw, he dropped to one knee and doffed his plumed cap.

"Your Majesty! Truly, this is a miracle passing belief! The great bell in the citadel has tolled your dirge, days agone. Men said you died at Valkia, crushed under a million tons of earth and broken granite."

"It was another in my harness," grunted Conan. "But let us talk later. If there is such a thing as a joint of beef on your board——"

"Forgive me, my lord!" cried Servius, springing to his feet. "The dust of travel is gray on your mail, and I keep you standing here without rest or sup! Mitra! I see well enough now that you are alive, but I swear, when I turned and saw you standing all gray and dim in the twilight, the marrow of my knees turned to water. It is an ill thing to meet a man you thought dead in the woodland at dusk."

"Bid the keeper see to my steed which is tied behind yonder oak," requested Conan, and Servius nodded, drawing the king up the path. The patrician, recovering from his supernatural fright, had become extremely nervous.

"I will send a servant from the manor," he said. "The keeper is in his lodge—but I dare not trust even my servants in these days. It is better that only I know of your presence."

Approaching the great house that glimmered dimly through the trees, he turned aside into a little-used path that ran between close-set oaks whose intertwining branches formed a vault overhead, shutting out the dim light of the gathering dusk. Servius hurried on through the darkness without speaking, and with something resembling panic in his manner, and presently led Conan through a small side-door into a narrow, dimly illuminated corridor. They traversed this in haste and silence, and Servius brought the king into a spacious chamber with a high, oak-beamed ceiling and richly paneled walls. Logs flamed in the wide fireplace, for there was a frosty edge to the air, and a great meat pasty in a stone platter stood smoking on a broad mahogany board. Servius locked the massive door and extinguished the candles that stood in a silver candlestick on the table, leaving the chamber illuminated only by the fire on the hearth.

"Your pardon, your Majesty," he apologized. "These are perilous times; spies lurk everywhere. It were better that none be able to peer through the windows and recognize you. This pasty, however, is just from the oven, as I intended supping on my return from talk with my keeper. If your Majesty would deign——"

"The light is sufficient," grunted Co-

nan, seating himself with scant ceremony, and drawing his poniard.

He dug ravenously into the luscious dish, and washed it down with great gulps of wine from grapes grown in Servius's vineyards. He seemed oblivious to any sense of peril, but Servius shifted uneasily on his settle by the fire, nervously fingering the heavy gold chain about his neck. He glanced continually at the diamond-panes of the casement, gleaming dimly in the firelight, and cocked his ear toward the door, as if half expecting to hear the pad of furtive feet in the corridor without.

FINISHING his meal, Conan rose and seated himself on another settle before the fire.

"I won't jeopardize you long by my presence, Servius," he said abruptly. "Dawn will find me far from your plantation."

"My lord——" Servius lifted his hands in expostulation, but Conan waved his protests aside.

"I know your loyalty and your courage. Both are above reproach. But if Valerius has usurped my throne, it would be death for you to shelter me, if you were discovered."

"I am not strong enough to defy him openly," admitted Servius. "The fifty men-at-arms I could lead to battle would be but a handful of straws. You saw the ruins of Emilius Scavonus's plantation?"

Conan nodded, frowning darkly.

"He was the strongest patrician in this province, as you know. He refused to give his allegiance to Valerius. The Nemedians burned him in the ruins of his own villa. After that the rest of us saw the futility of resistance, especially as the people of Tarantia refused to fight. We submitted and Valerius spared our lives, though he levied a tax upon us that will ruin many. But what could we do? We thought you were dead. Many of the barons had been slain, others taken prisoner. The army was shattered and scattered. You have no heir to take the crown. There was no one to lead us——"

"Was there not Count Trocero of Poitain?" demanded Conan harshly.

Servius spread his hands helplessly.

"It is true that his general Prospero was in the field with a small army. Retreating before Amalric, he urged men to rally to his banner. But with your Majesty dead, men remembered old wars and civil brawls, and how Trocero and his Poitanians once rode through these provinces even as Amalric was riding now, with torch and sword. The barons were jealous of Trocero. Some men—spies of Valerius perhaps—shouted that the Count of Poitain intended seizing the crown for himself. Old sectional hates flared up again. If we had had one man with dynastic blood in his veins we would have crowned and followed him against Nemedia. But we had none.

"The barons who followed you loyally would not follow one of their own number, each holding himself as good as his neighbor, each fearing the ambitions of the others. You were the cord that held the fagots together. When the cord was cut, the fagots fell apart. If you had had a son, the barons would have rallied loyally to him. But there was no point for their patriotism to focus upon.

"The merchants and commoners, dreading anarchy and a return of feudal days when each baron was his own law, cried out that any king was better than none, even Valerius, who was at least of the blood of the old dynasty. There was no one to oppose him when he rode up at the head of his steel-clad hosts, with the scarlet dragon of Nemedia floating over him, and rang his lance against the gates of Tarantia.

"Nay, the people threw open the gates and knelt in the dust before him. They had refused to aid Prospero in holding the city. They said they had rather be ruled by Valerius than by Trocero. They said—truthfully—that the barons would not rally to Trocero, but that many would accept Valerius. They said that by yielding to Valerius they would escape the devastation of civil war, and the fury of the Nemedians. Prospero rode southward with his ten thousand knights, and the horsemen of the Nemedians entered the city a few hours later. They did not follow him. They remained to see that Valerius was crowned in Tarantia."

"Then the old witch's smoke showed the truth," muttered Conan, feeling a queer chill along his spine. "Amalric crowned Valerius?"

"Aye, in the coronation hall, with the blood of slaughter scarcely dried on his hands."

"And do the people thrive under his benevolent rule?" asked Conan with angry irony.

"He lives like a foreign prince in the midst of a conquered land," answered Servius bitterly. "His court is filled with Nemedians, the palace troops are of the same breed, and a large garrison of them occupy the citadel. Aye, the hour of the Dragon has come at last.

"Nemedians swagger like lords through the streets. Women are outraged and merchants plundered daily, and Valerius either can, or will, make no attempt to curb them. Nay, he is but their puppet, their figurehead. Men of sense knew he would be, and the people are beginning to find it out.

"Amalric has ridden forth with a strong army to reduce the outlying provinces where some of the barons have defied him. But there is no unity among them. Their jealousy of each other is stronger than their fear of Amalric. He will crush them one by one. Many castles and cities, realizing that, have sent in their submission. Those who resist fare miserably. The Nemedians are glutting their long hatred. And their ranks are swelled by Aquilonians whom fear, gold, or necessity of occupation are forcing into their armies. It is a natural consequence."

Conan nodded somberly, staring at the red reflections of the firelight on the richly carved oaken panels.

"Aquilonia has a king instead of the anarchy they feared," said Servius at last. "Valerius does not protect his subjects against his allies. Hundreds who could not pay the ransom imposed upon them have been sold to the Kothic slave-traders."

Conan's head jerked up and a lethal flame lit his blue eyes. He swore gustily, his mighty hands knotting into iron hammers.

"Aye, white men sell white men and white women, as it was in the feudal days. In the palaces of Shem and of Turan they will live out the lives of slaves. Valerius is king, but the unity for which the people looked, even though of the sword, is not complete.

"Gunderland in the north and Poitain in the south are yet unconquered, and there are unsubdued provinces in the west, where the border barons have the backing of the Bossonian bowmen. Yet these outlying provinces are no real menace to Valerius. They must remain on the defensive, and will be lucky if they are able to keep their independence. Here Valerius and his foreign knights are supreme."

"Let him make the best of it then," said Conan grimly. "His time is short. The people will rise when they learn that I'm alive. We'll take Tarantia back before Amalric can return with his army. Then we'll sweep these dogs from the kingdom."

SERVIUS was silent. The crackle of the fire was loud in the stillness.

"Well," exclaimed Conan impatiently, "why do you sit with your head bent, staring at the hearth? Do you doubt what I have said?"

Servius avoided the king's eye.

"What mortal man can do, you will do, your Majesty," he answered. "I have ridden behind you in battle, and I know that no mortal being can stand before your sword."

"What, then?"

Servius drew his fur-trimmed jupon closer about him, and shivered in spite of the flame.

"Men say your fall was occasioned by sorcery," he said presently.

"What then?"

"What mortal can fight against sorcery? Who is this veiled man who communes at midnight with Valerius and his allies, as men say, who appears and disappears so mysteriously? Men say in whispers that he is a great magician who died thousands of years ago, but has returned from death's gray lands to overthrow the king of Aquilonia and restore the dynasty of which Valerius is heir."

"What matter?" exclaimed Conan angrily. "I escaped from the devil-haunted pits of Belverus, and from diabolism in the mountains. If the people rise——"

Servius shook his head.

"Your staunchest supporters in the eastern and central provinces are dead, fled or imprisoned. Gunderland is far to the north, Poitain far to the south. The Bossonians have retired to their marches far to the west. It would take weeks to gather and concentrate these forces, and before that could be done, each levy would be attacked separately by Amalric and destroyed."

"But an uprising in the central provinces would tip the scales for us!" exclaimed Conan. "We could seize Tarantia and hold it against Amalric until the Gundermen and Poitanians could get here."

Servius hesitated, and his voice sank to a whisper.

"Men say you died accursed. Men say this veiled stranger cast a spell upon you to slay you and break your army. The great bell has tolled your dirge. Men believe you to be dead. And the central provinces would not rise, even if they knew you lived. They would not dare. Sorcery defeated you at Valkia. Sorcery brought the news to Tarantia, for that very night men were shouting of it in the streets.

"A Nemedian priest loosed black magic again in the streets of Tarantia to slay men who still were loyal to your memory. I myself saw it. Armed men dropped like flies and died in the streets in a manner no man could understand. And the lean priest laughed and said: 'I am only Altaro, only an acolyte of Orastes, who is but an acolyte of him who wears the veil; not mine is the power; the power but works through me.' "

"Well," said Conan harshly, "is it not better to die honorably than to live in infamy? Is death worse than oppression, slavery and ultimate destruction?"

"When the fear of sorcery is in, reason is out," replied Servius. "The fear of the central provinces is too great to allow them to rise for you. The outlying provinces would fight for you—but the same sorcery that smote your army at Valkia would smite you again. The Nemedians hold the broadest, richest and most thickly populated sections of Aquilonia, and they cannot be defeated by the forces which might still be at your command. You would be sacrificing your loyal subjects uselessly. In sorrow I say it, but it is true: King Conan, you are a king without a kingdom."

Conan stared into the fire without re-

plying. A smoldering log crashed down among the flames without a bursting shower of sparks. It might have been the crashing ruin of his kingdom.

Again Conan felt the presence of a grim reality behind the veil of material illusion. He sensed again the inexorable drive of a ruthless fate. A feeling of furious panic tugged at his soul, a sense of being trapped, and a red rage that burned to destroy and kill.

"Where are the officials of my court?" he demanded at last.

"Pallantides was sorely wounded at Valkia, was ransomed by his family, and now lies in his castle in Attalus. He will be fortunate if he ever rides again. Publius, the chancellor, has fled the kingdom in disguise, no man knows whither. The council has been disbanded. Some were imprisoned, some banished. Many of your loyal subjects have been put to death. Tonight, for instance, the Countess Albiona dies under the headsman's ax."

Conan started and stared at Servius with such anger smoldering in his blue eyes that the patrician shrank back.

"Why?"

"Because she would not become the mistress of Valerius. Her lands are forfeit, her henchmen sold into slavery, and at midnight, in the Iron Tower, her head must fall. Be advised, my king—to me you will ever be my king—and flee before you are discovered. In these days none is safe. Spies and informers creep among us, betraying the slightest deed or word of discontent as treason and rebellion. If you make yourself known to your subjects it will only end in your capture and death.

"My horses and all the men that I can trust are at your disposal. Before dawn we can be far from Tarantia, and well on our way toward the border. If I cannot aid you to recover your kingdom, I can at least follow you into exile."

Conan shook his head. Servius glanced uneasily at him as he sat staring into the fire, his chin propped on his mighty fist. The firelight gleamed redly on his steel mail, on his baleful eyes. They burned in the firelight like the eyes of a wolf. Servius was again aware, as in the past, and now more strongly than ever, of something alien about the king. That great frame under the mail mesh was too hard and supple for a civilized man; the elemental fire of the primitive burned in those smoldering eyes. Now the barbaric suggestion about the king was more pronounced, as if in his extremity the outward aspects of civilization were stripped away, to reveal the primordial core. Conan was reverting to his pristine type. He did not act as a civilized man would act under the same conditions, nor did his thoughts run in the same channels. He was unpredictable. It was only a stride from the king of Aquilonia to the skin-clad slayer of the Cimmerian hills.

"I'll ride to Poitain, if it may be," Conan said at last. "But I'll ride alone. And I have one last duty to perform as king of Aquilonia."

"What do you mean, your Majesty?" asked Servius, shaken by a premonition.

"I'm going into Tarantia after Albiona tonight," answered the king. "I've failed all my other loyal subjects, it seems—if they take her head, they can have mine too."

"This is madness!" cried Servius, staggering up and clutching his throat, as if he already felt the noose closing about it.

"There are secrets to the Tower which few know," said Conan. "Anyway, I'd be a dog to leave Albiona to die because of her loyalty to me. I may be a king without a kingdom, but I'm not a man without honor."

"It will ruin us all!" whispered Servius.

"It will ruin no one but me if I fail. You've risked enough. I ride alone tonight. This is all I want you to do: procure me a patch for my eye, a staff for my hand, and garments such as travelers wear."

9. *"It Is the King or His Ghost!"*

MANY men passed through the great arched gates of Tarantia between sunset and midnight—belated travelers, merchants from afar with heavily laden mules, free workmen from the surrounding farms and vineyards. Now that Valerius was supreme in the central provinces, there was no rigid scrutiny of the folk who flowed in a steady stream through the wide gates. Discipline had been relaxed. The Nemedian soldiers who stood on guard were half drunk, and much too busy watching for handsome peasant girls and rich merchants who could be bullied to notice workmen or dusty travelers, even one tall wayfarer whose worn cloak could not conceal the hard lines of his powerful frame.

This man carried himself with an erect, aggressive bearing that was too natural for him to realize it himself, much less dissemble it. A great patch covered one eye, and his leather coif, drawn low over his brows, shadowed his features. With a long thick staff in his muscular brown hand, he strode leisurely through the arch where the torches flared and guttered, and, ignored by the tipsy guardsmen, emerged upon the wide streets of Tarantia.

Upon these well-lighted thoroughfares the usual throngs went about their business, and shops and stalls stood open, with their wares displayed. One thread ran a constant theme through the pattern. Nemedian soldiers, singly or in clumps, swaggered through the throngs, shouldering their way with studied arrogance. Women scurried from their path, and men stepped aside with darkened brows and clenched fists. The Aquilonians were a proud race, and these were their hereditary enemies.

The knuckles of the tall traveler knotted on his staff, but, like the others, he stepped aside to let the men in armor have the way. Among the motley and varied crowd he did not attract much attention in his drab, dusty garments. But once, as he passed a sword-seller's stall and the light that streamed from its wide door fell full upon him, he thought he felt an intense stare upon him, and turning quickly, saw a man in the brown jerkin of a free workman regarding him fixedly. This man turned away with undue haste, and vanished in the shifting throng. But Conan turned into a narrow by-street and quickened his pace. It might have been mere idle curiosity; but he could take no chances.

The grim Iron Tower stood apart from the citadel, amid a maze of narrow streets and crowding houses where the meaner structures, appropriating a space from which the more fastidious shrank, had invaded a portion of the city ordinarily alien to them. The Tower was in reality a castle, an ancient, formidable pile of heavy stone and black iron, which had itself served as the citadel in an earlier, ruder century.

Not a long distance from it, lost in a tangle of partly deserted tenements and warehouses, stood an ancient watchtower, so old and forgotten that it did not appear on the maps of the city for a hundred years back. Its original purpose had been forgotten, and nobody, of such as saw it at all, noticed that the apparently ancient lock which kept it from being appropriated as sleeping-quarters by beggars and thieves, was in reality com-

paratively new and extremely powerful, cunningly disguised into an appearance of rusty antiquity. Not half a dozen men in the kingdom had ever known the secret of that tower.

No keyhole showed in the massive, green-crusted lock. But Conan's practised fingers, stealing over it, pressed here and there knobs invisible to the casual eye. The door silently opened inward and he entered solid blackness, pushing the door shut behind him. A light would have showed the tower empty, a bare, cylindrical shaft of massive stone.

Groping in a corner with the sureness of familiarity, he found the projections for which he was feeling on a slab of the stone that composed the floor. Quickly he lifted it, and without hesitation lowered himself into the aperture beneath. His feet felt stone steps leading downward into what he knew was a narrow tunnel that ran straight toward the foundations of the Iron Tower, three streets away.

The bell on the citadel, which tolled only at the midnight hour or for the death of a king, boomed suddenly. In a dimly lighted chamber in the Iron Tower a door opened and a form emerged into a corridor. The interior of the Tower was as forbidding as its external appearance. Its massive stone walls were rough, unadorned. The flags of the floor were worn deep by generations of faltering feet, and the vault of the ceiling was gloomy in the dim light of torches set in niches.

The man who trudged down that grim corridor was in appearance in keeping with his surroundings. He was a tall, powerfully-built man, clad in close-fitting black silk. Over his head was drawn a black hood which fell about his shoulders, having two holes for his eyes. From his shoulders hung a loose black cloak, and over one shoulder he bore a heavy ax, the shape of which was that of neither tool nor weapon.

As he went down the corridor, a figure came hobbling up it, a bent, surly old man, stooping under the weight of his pike and a lantern he bore in one hand.

"You are not as prompt as your predecessor, master headsman," he grumbled. "Midnight has just struck, and masked men have gone to milady's cell. They await you."

"The tones of the bell still echo among the towers," answered the executioner. "If I am not so quick to leap and run at the beck of Aquilonians as was the dog who held this office before me, they shall find my arm no less ready. Get you to your duties, old watchman, and leave me to mine. I think mine is the sweeter trade, by Mitra, for you tramp cold corridors and peer at rusty dungeon doors, while I lop off the fairest head in Tarantia this night."

The watchman limped on down the corridor, still grumbling, and the headsman resumed his leisurely way. A few strides carried him around a turn in the corridor, and he absently noted that at his left a door stood partly open. If he had thought, he would have known that that door had been opened since the watchman passed; but thinking was not his trade. He was passing the unlocked door before he realized that aught was amiss, and then it was too late.

A soft tigerish step and the rustle of a cloak warned him, but before he could turn, a heavy arm hooked about his throat from behind, crushing the cry before it could reach his lips. In the brief instant that was allowed him he realized with a surge of panic the strength of his attacker, against which his own brawny thews were helpless. He sensed without seeing the poised dagger.

"Nemedian dog!" muttered a voice

thick with passion in his ear. "You've cut off your last Aquilonian head!"

And that was the last thing he ever heard.

In a dank dungeon, lighted only by a guttering torch, three men stood about a young woman who knelt on the rush-strewn flags staring wildly up at them. She was clad only in a scanty shift; her golden hair fell in lustrous ripples about her white shoulders, and her wrists were bound behind her. Even in the uncertain torchlight, and in spite of her disheveled condition and pallor of fear, her beauty was striking. She knelt mutely, staring with wide eyes up at her tormenters. The men were closely masked and cloaked. Such a deed as this needed masks, even in a conquered land. She knew them all, nevertheless; but what she knew would harm no one—after that night.

"Our merciful sovereign offers you one more chance, Countess," said the tallest of the three, and he spoke Aquilonian without an accent. "He bids me say that if you soften your proud, rebellious spirit, he will still open his arms to you. If not——" he gestured toward a grim wooden block in the center of the cell. It was blackly stained, and showed many deep nicks as if a keen edge, cutting through some yielding substance, had sunk into the wood.

Albiona shuddered and turned pale, shrinking back. Every fiber in her vigorous young body quivered with the urge of life. Valerius was young, too, and handsome. Many women loved him, she told herself, fighting with herself for life. But she could not speak the word that would ransom her soft young body from the block and the dripping ax. She could not reason the matter. She only knew that when she thought of the clasp of Valerius's arms, her flesh crawled with an abhorrence greater than the fear of death. She shook her head helplessly, compelled by an impulsion more irresistible than the instinct to live.

"Then there is no more to be said!" exclaimed one of the others impatiently, and he spoke with a Nemedian accent. "Where is the headsman?"

As if summoned by the word, the dungeon door opened silently, and a great figure stood framed in it, like a black shadow from the underworld.

Albiona voiced a low, involuntary cry at the sight of that grim shape, and the others stared silently for a moment, perhaps themselves daunted with superstitious awe at the silent, hooded figure. Through the coif the eyes blazed like coals of blue fire, and as these eyes rested on each man in turn, he felt a curious chill travel down his spine.

Then the tall Aquilonian roughly seized the girl and dragged her to the block. She screamed uncontrollably and fought hopelessly against him, frantic with terror, but he ruthlessly forced her to her knees, and bent her yellow head down to the bloody block.

"Why do you delay, headsman?" he exclaimed angrily. "Perform your task!"

He was answered by a short, gusty boom of laughter that was indescribably menacing. All in the dungeon froze in their places, staring at the hooded shape—the two cloaked figures, the masked man bending over the girl, the girl herself on her knees, twisting her imprisoned head to look upward.

"What means this unseemly mirth, dog?" demanded the Aquilonian uneasily.

The man in the black garb tore his hood from his head and flung it to the ground; he set his back to the closed door and lifted the headsman's ax.

"Do you know me, dogs?" he rumbled. "Do you know me?"

The breathless silence was broken by a scream.

"The king!" shrieked Albiona, wrenching herself free from the slackened grasp of her captor. "Oh, Mitra, *the king!*"

The three men stood like statues, and then the Aquilonian started and spoke, like a man who doubts his own senses.

"Conan!" he ejaculated. "It *is* the king, or his ghost! What devil's work is this?"

"Devil's work to match devils!" mocked Conan, his lips laughing but hell flaming in his eyes. "Come, fall to, my gentlemen. You have your swords, and I this cleaver. Nay, I think this butcher's tool fits the work at hand, my fair lords!"

"At him!" muttered the Aquilonian, drawing his sword. "It is Conan and we must kill or be killed!"

And like men waking from a trance, the Nemedians drew their blades and rushed on the king.

The headsman's ax was not made for such work, but the king wielded the heavy, clumsy weapon as lightly as a hatchet, and his quickness of foot, as he constantly shifted his position, defeated their purpose of engaging him all three at once.

He caught the sword of the first man on his ax-head and crushed in the wielder's breast with a murderous counterstroke before he could step back or parry. The remaining Nemedian, missing a savage swipe, had his brains dashed out before he could recover his balance, and an instant later the Aquilonian was backed into a corner, desperately parrying the crashing strokes that rained about him, lacking opportunity even to scream for help.

Suddenly Conan's long left arm shot out and ripped the mask from the man's head, disclosing the pallid features.

"Dog!" grated the king. "I thought I knew you. Traitor! Damned renegade! Even this base steel is too honorable for your foul head. Nay, die as thieves die!"

The ax fell in a devastating arc, and the Aquilonian cried out and went to his knees, grasping the severed stump of his right arm from which blood spouted. It had been shorn away at the elbow, and the ax, unchecked in its descent, had gashed deeply into his side, so that his entrails bulged out.

"Lie there and bleed to death," grunted Conan, casting the ax away disgustedly. "Come, Countess!"

Stooping, he slashed the cords that bound her wrists and lifting her as if she had been a child, strode from the dungeon. She was sobbing hysterically, with her arms thrown about his corded neck in a frenzied embrace.

"Easy all," he muttered. "We're not out of this yet. If we can reach the dungeon where the secret door opens on stairs that lead to the tunnel—devil take it, they've heard that noise, even through these walls."

Down the corridor arms clanged and the tramp and shouting of men echoed under the vaulted roof. A bent figure came hobbling swiftly along, lantern held high, and its light shone full on Conan and the girl. With a curse the Cimmerian sprang toward him, but the old watchman, abandoning both lantern and pike, scuttled away down the corridor, screeching for help at the top of his cracked voice. Deeper shouts answered him.

Conan turned swiftly and ran the other way. He was cut off from the dungeon with the secret lock and the hidden door through which he had entered the Tower, and by which he had hoped to leave, but he knew this grim building well. Before he was king he had been imprisoned in it.

He turned off into a side passage and quickly emerged into another, broader corridor, which ran parallel to the one down which he had come, and which

was at the moment deserted. He followed this only a few yards, when he again turned back, down another side passage. This brought him back into the corridor he had left, but at a strategic point. A few feet farther up the corridor there was a heavy bolted door, and before it stood a bearded Nemedian in corselet and helmet, his back to Conan as he peered up the corridor in the direction of the growing tumult and wildly waving lanterns.

Conan did not hesitate. Slipping the girl to the ground, he ran at the guard swiftly and silently, sword in hand. The man turned just as the king reached him, bawled in surprize and fright and lifted his pike; but before he could bring the clumsy weapon into play, Conan brought down his sword on the fellow's helmet with a force that would have felled an ox. Helmet and skull gave way together and the guard crumpled to the floor.

In an instant Conan had drawn the massive bolt that barred the door—too heavy for one ordinary man to have manipulated—and called hastily to Albiona, who ran staggering to him. Catching her up unceremoniously with one arm, he bore her through the door and into the outer darkness.

They had come into a narrow alley, black as pitch, walled by the side of the Tower on one hand, and the sheer stone back of a row of buildings on the other. Conan, hurrying through the darkness as swiftly as he dared, felt the latter wall for doors or windows, but found none.

The great door clanged open behind them, and men poured out, with torches gleaming on breastplates and naked swords. They glared about, bellowing, unable to penetrate the darkness which their torches served to illuminate for only a few feet in any direction, and then rushed down the alley at random—heading in the direction opposite to that taken by Conan and Albiona.

"They'll learn their mistake quick enough," he muttered, increasing his pace. If we ever find a crack in this infernal wall—damn! The street watch!"

Ahead of them a faint glow became apparent, where the alley opened into a narrow street, and he saw dim figures looming against it with a glimmer of steel. It was indeed the street watch, investigating the noise they had heard echoing down the alley.

"Who goes there?" they shouted, and Conan grit his teeth at the hated Nemedian accent.

"Keep behind me," he ordered the girl. "We've got to cut our way through before the prison guards come back and pin us between them."

And grasping his sword, he ran straight at the oncoming figures. The advantage of surprize was his. He could see them, limned against the distant glow, and they could not see him coming at them out of the black depths of the alley. He was among them before they knew it, smiting with the silent fury of a wounded lion.

His one chance lay in hacking through before they could gather their wits. But there were half a score of them, in full mail, hard-bitten veterans of the border wars, in whom the instinct for battle could take the place of bemused wits. Three of them were down before they realized that it was only one man who was attacking them, but even so their reaction was instantaneous. The clangor of steel rose deafeningly, and sparks flew as Conan's sword crashed on basinet and hauberk. He could see better than they, and in the dim light his swiftly moving figure was an uncertain mark. Flailing swords cut empty air or glanced from his

blade, and when he struck, it was with the fury and certainty of a hurricane.

But behind him sounded the shouts of the prison guards, returning up the alley at a run, and still the mailed figures before him barred his way with a bristling wall of steel. In an instant the guards would be on his back—in desperation he redoubled his strokes, flailing like a smith on an anvil, and then was suddenly aware of a diversion. Out of nowhere behind the watchmen rose a score of black figures and there was a sound of blows, murderously driven. Steel glinted in the gloom, and men cried out, struck mortally from behind. In an instant the alley was littered with writhing forms. A dark, cloaked shape sprang toward Conan, who heaved up his sword, catching a gleam of steel in the right hand. But the other was extended to him empty and a voice hissed urgently: "This way, your Majesty! Quickly!"

With a muttered oath of surprize, Conan caught up Albiona in one massive arm, and followed his unknown befriender. He was not inclined to hesitate, with thirty prison guardsmen closing in behind him.

Surrounded by mysterious figures he hurried down the alley, carrying the countess as if she had been a child. He could tell nothing of his rescuers except that they wore dark cloaks and hoods. Doubt and suspicion crossed his mind, but at least they had struck down his enemies, and he saw no better course than to follow them.

As if sensing his doubt, the leader touched his arm lightly and said: "Fear not, King Conan; we are your loyal subjects." The voice was not familiar, but the accent was Aquilonian of the central provinces.

Behind them the guards were yelling as they stumbled over the shambles in the mud, and they came pelting vengefully down the alley, seeing the vague dark mass moving between them and the light of the distant street. But the hooded men turned suddenly toward the seemingly blank wall, and Conan saw a door gape there. He muttered a curse. He had traversed that alley by day, in times past, and had never noticed a door there. But through it they went, and the door closed behind them with the click of a lock. The sound was not reassuring, but his guides were hurrying him on, moving with the precision of familiarity, guiding Conan with a hand at either elbow. It was like traversing a tunnel, and Conan felt Albiona's lithe limbs trembling in his arms. Then somewhere ahead of them an opening was faintly visible, merely a somewhat less black arch in the blackness, and through this they filed.

After that there was a bewildering succession of dim courts and shadowy alleys and winding corridors, all traversed in utter silence, until at last they emerged into a broad lighted chamber, the location of which Conan could not even guess, for their devious route had confused even his primitive sense of direction.

10. A Coin From Acheron

Not all his guides entered the chamber. When the door closed, Conan saw only one man standing before him—a slim figure, masked in a black cloak with a hood. This the man threw back, disclosing a pale oval of a face, with calm, delicately chiseled features.

The king set Albiona on her feet, but she still clung to him and stared apprehensively about her. The chamber was a large one, with marble walls partly covered with black velvet hangings and thick rich carpets on the mosaic floor, laved in the soft golden glow of bronze lamps.

Conan instinctively laid a hand on his hilt. There was blood on his hand, blood clotted about the mouth of his scabbard, for he had sheathed his blade without cleansing it.

"Where are we?" he demanded.

The stranger answered with a low, profound bow in which the suspicious king could detect no trace of irony.

"In the temple of Asura, your Majesty."

Albiona cried out faintly and clung closer to Conan, staring fearfully at the black, arched doors, as if expecting the entry of some grisly shape of darkness.

"Fear not, my lady," said their guide. "There is nothing here to harm you, vulgar superstition to the contrary. If your monarch was sufficiently convinced of the innocence of our religion to protect us from the persecution of the ignorant, then certainly one of his subjects need have no apprehensions."

"Who are you?" demanded Conan.

"I am Hadrathus, priest of Asura. One of my followers recognized you when you entered the city, and brought the word to me."

Conan grunted profanely.

"Do not fear that others discovered your identity," Hadrathus assured him. "Your disguise would have deceived any but a follower of Asura, whose cult it is to seek below the aspect of illusion. You were followed to the watch tower, and some of my people went into the tunnel to aid you if you returned by that route. Others, myself among them, surrounded the tower. And now, King Conan, it is yours to command. Here in the temple of Asura you are still king."

"Why should you risk your lives for me?" asked the king.

"You were our friend when you sat upon your throne," answered Hadrathus. "You protected us when the priests of Mitra sought to scourge us out of the land."

Conan looked about him curiously. He had never before visited the temple of Asura, had not certainly known that there was such a temple in Tarantia. The priests of the religion had a habit of hiding their temples in a remarkable fashion. The worship of Mitra was overwhelmingly predominant in the Hyborian nations, but the cult of Asura persisted, in spite of official ban and popular antagonism. Conan had been told dark tales of hidden temples where intense smoke drifted up incessantly from black altars where kidnaped humans were sacrificed before a great coiled serpent, whose fearsome head swayed for ever in the haunted shadows.

Persecution caused the followers of Asura to hide their temples with cunning art, and to veil their rituals in obscurity; and this secrecy, in turn, evoked more monstrous suspicions and tales of evil.

But Conan's was the broad tolerance of the barbarian, and he had refused to persecute the followers of Asura or to allow the people to do so on no better evidence than was presented against them, rumors and accusations that could not be proven. "If they are black magicians," he had said, "how will they suffer you to harry them? If they are not, there is no evil in them. Crom's devils! Let men worship what gods they will."

At a respectful invitation from Hadrathus he seated himself on an ivory chair, and motioned Albiona to another, but she preferred to sit on a golden stool at his feet, pressing close against his thigh, as if seeking security in the contact. Like most orthodox followers of Mitra, she had an intuitive horror of the followers and cult of Asura, instilled in her infancy and childhood by wild tales of human sacrifice and anthropomorphic gods shambling through shadowy temples.

Hadrathus stood before them, his uncovered head bowed.

"What is your wish, your Majesty?"

"Food, first," he grunted, and the priest smote a golden gong with a silver wand.

SCARCELY had the mellow notes ceased echoing when four hooded figures came through a curtained doorway bearing a great four-legged silver platter of smoking dishes and crystal vessels. This they set before Conan, bowing low, and the king wiped his hands on the damask, and smacked his lips with unconcealed relish.

"Beware, your Majesty!" whispered Albiona. "These folk eat human flesh!"

"I'll stake my kingdom that this is nothing but honest roast beef," answered Conan. "Come, lass, fall to! You must be hungry after the prison fare."

Thus advised, and with the example before her of one whose word was the ultimate law to her, the countess complied, and ate ravenously though daintily, while her liege lord tore into the meat joints and guzzled the wine with as much gusto as if he had not already eaten once that night.

"You priests are shrewd, Hadrathus," he said, with a great beef-bone in his hands and his mouth full of meat. "I'd welcome your service in my campaign to regain my kingdom."

Slowly Hadrathus shook his head, and Conan slammed the beef-bone down on the table in a gust of impatient wrath.

"Crom's devils! What ails the men of Aquilonia? First Servius—now you! Can you do nothing but wag your idiotic heads when I speak of ousting these dogs?"

Hadrathus sighed and answered slowly: "My lord, it is ill to say, and I fain would say otherwise. But the freedom of Aquilonia is at an end. Nay, the freedom of the whole world may be at an end! Age follows age in the history of the world, and now we enter an age of horror and slavery, as it was long ago."

"What do you mean?" demanded the king uneasily.

Hadrathus dropped into a chair and rested his elbows on his thighs, staring at the floor.

"It is not alone the rebellious lords of Aquilonia and the armies of Nemedia which are arrayed against you," answered Hadrathus. "It is sorcery—grisly black magic from the grim youth of the world. An awful shape has risen out of the shades of the Past, and none can stand before it."

"What do you mean?" Conan repeated.

"I speak of Xaltotun of Acheron, who died three thousand years ago, yet walks the earth today."

Conan was silent, while in his mind floated an image—the image of a bearded face of calm inhuman beauty. Again he was haunted by a sense of uneasy familiarity. Acheron—the sound of the word roused instinctive vibrations of memory and associations in his mind.

"Acheron," he repeated. "Xaltotun of Acheron—man, are you mad? Acheron has been a myth for more centuries than I can remember. I've often wondered if it ever existed at all."

"It was a black reality," answered Hadrathus, "an empire of black magicians, steeped in evil now long forgotten. It was finally overthrown by the Hyborian tribes of the west. The wizards of Acheron practised foul necromancy, thaumaturgy of the most evil kind, grisly magic taught them by devils. And of all the sorcerers of that accursed kingdom, none was so great as Xaltotun of Python."

"Then how was he ever overthrown?" asked Conan skeptically.

"By some means a source of cosmic power which he jealously guarded was

stolen and turned against him. That source has been returned to him, and he is invincible."

Albiona, hugging the headsman's black cloak about her, stared from the priest to the king, not understanding the conversation. Conan shook his head angrily.

"You are making game of me," he growled. "If Xaltotun has been dead three thousand years, how can this man be he? It's some rogue who's taken the old one's name."

Hadrathus leaned to an ivory table and opened a small gold chest which stood there. From it he took something which glinted dully in the mellow light—a broad gold coin of antique minting.

"You have seen Xaltotun unveiled? Then look upon this. It is a coin which was stamped in ancient Acheron, before its fall. So pervaded with sorcery was that black empire, that even this coin has its uses in making magic."

Conan took it and scowled down at it. There was no mistaking its great antiquity. Conan had handled many coins in the years of his plunderings, and had a good practical knowledge of them. The edges were worn and the inscription almost obliterated. But the countenance stamped on one side was still clear-cut and distinct. And Conan's breath sucked in between his clenched teeth. It was not cool in the chamber, but he felt a prickling of his scalp, an icy contraction of his flesh. The countenance was that of a bearded man, inscrutable, with a calm inhuman beauty.

"By Crom! It's he!" muttered Conan. He understood, now, the sense of familiarity that the sight of the bearded man had roused in him from the first. He had seen a coin like this once before, long ago in a far land.

With a shake of his shoulders he growled: "The likeness is only a coincidence—or if he's shrewd enough to assume a forgotten wizard's name, he's shrewd enough to assume his likeness." But he spoke without conviction. The sight of that coin had shaken the foundations of his universe. He felt that reality and stability were crumbling into an abyss of illusion and sorcery. A wizard was understandable; but this was diabolism beyond sanity.

"We cannot doubt that it is indeed Xaltotun of Python," said Hadrathus. "He it was who shook down the cliffs at Valkia, by his spells that enthrall the elementals of the earth—he it was who sent the creature of darkness into your tent before dawn."

Conan scowled at him. "How did you know that?"

"The followers of Asura have secret channels of knowledge. That does not matter. But do you realize the futility of sacrificing your subjects in a vain attempt to regain your crown?"

Conan rested his chin on his fist, and stared grimly into nothing. Albiona watched him anxiously, her mind groping bewildered in the mazes of the problem that confronted him.

"Is there no wizard in the world who could make magic to fight Xaltotun's magic?" he asked at last.

Hadrathus shook his head. "If there were, we of Asura would know of him. Men say our cult is a survival of the ancient Stygian serpent-worship. That is a lie. Our ancestors came from Vendhya, beyond the Sea of Vilayet and the blue Himelian mountains. We are sons of the East, not the South, and we have knowledge of all the wizards of the East, who are greater than the wizards of the West. And not one of them but would be a straw in the wind before the black might of Xaltotun."

"But he was conquered once," persisted Conan.

"Aye; a cosmic source was turned

against him. But now that source is again in his hands, and he will see that it is not stolen again."

"And what is this damnable source?" demanded Conan irritably.

"It is called the Heart of Ahriman. When Acheron was overthrown, the primitive priest who had stolen it and turned it against Xaltotun hid it in a haunted cavern and built a small temple over the cavern. Thrice thereafter the temple was rebuilt, each time greater and more elaborately than before, but always on the site of the original shrine, though men forgot the reason therefor. Memory of the hidden symbol faded from the minds of common men, and was preserved only in priestly books and esoteric volumes. Whence it came no one knows. Some say it is the veritable heart of a god, others that it is a star that fell from the skies long ago. Until it was stolen, none had looked upon it for three thousand years.

"When the magic of the Mitran priests failed against the magic of Xaltotun's acolyte, Altaro, they remembered the ancient legend of the Heart, and the high priest and an acolyte went down into the dark and terrible crypt below the temple into which no priest had descended for three thousand years. In the ancient iron-bound volumes which speak of the Heart in their cryptic symbolism, it is also told of a creature of darkness left by the ancient priest to guard it.

"Far down in a square chamber with arched doorways leading off into immeasurable blackness, the priest and his acolytes found a black stone altar that glowed dimly with inexplicable radiance.

"On that altar lay a curious gold vessel like a double-valved sea-shell which clung to the stone like a barnacle. But it gaped open and empty. The Heart of Ahriman was gone. While they stared in horror, the keeper of the crypt, the creature of darkness, came upon them and mangled the high priest so that he died. But the acolyte fought off the being—a mindless, soulless waif of the pits brought long ago to guard the Heart—and escaped up the long black narrow stairs carrying the dying priest, who, before he died, gasped out the news to his followers, bade them submit to a power they could not overcome, and commanded secrecy. But the word has been whispered about among the priests, and we of Asura learned of it."

"And Xaltotun draws his power from this symbol?" asked Conan, still skeptical.

"No. His power is drawn from the black gulf. But the Heart of Ahriman came from some far universe of flaming light, and against it the powers of darkness cannot stand, when it is in the hands of an adept. It is like a sword that might smite at him, not a sword with which he can smite. It restores life, and can destroy life. He has stolen it, not to use it against his enemies, but to keep them from using it against him."

"A shell-shaped bowl of gold on a black altar in a deep cavern," Conan muttered, frowning as he sought to capture the illusive image. "That reminds me of something I have heard or seen. But what, in Crom's name, *is* this notable Heart?"

"It is in the form of a great jewel, like a ruby, but pulsing with blinding fire with which no ruby ever burned. It glows like living flame——"

But Conan sprang suddenly up and smote his right fist into his left palm like a thunderclap.

"Crom!" he roared. "What a fool I've been! The Heart of Ahriman! The heart of my kingdom! Find the heart of my kingdom, Zelata said. By Ymir, it was the jewel I saw in the green smoke, the

jewel which Tarascus stole from Xaltotun while he lay in the sleep of the black lotus!"

Hadrathus was also on his feet, his calm dropped from him like a garment.

"What are you saying? The Heart stolen from Xaltotun?"

"Aye!" Conan boomed. "Tarascus feared Xaltotun and wanted to cripple his power, which he thought resided in the Heart. Maybe he thought the wizard would die if the Heart was lost. By Crom—ahhh!" With a savage grimace of disappointment and disgust he dropped his clenched hand to his side.

"I forgot. Tarascus gave it to a thief to throw into the sea. By this time the fellow must be almost to Kordava. Before I can follow him he'll take ship and consign the Heart to the bottom of the ocean."

"The sea will not hold it!" exclaimed Hadrathus, quivering with excitement. "Xaltotun would himself have cast it into the ocean long ago, had he not known that the first storm would carry it ashore. But on what unknown beach might it not land!"

"Well," Conan was recovering some of his resilient confidence, "there's no assurance that the thief will throw it away. If I know thieves—and I should, for I was a thief in Zamora in my early youth—he won't throw it away. He'll sell it to some rich trader. By Crom!" He strode back and forth in his growing excitement. "It's worth looking for! Zelata bade me find the heart of my kingdom, and all else she showed me proved to be truth. Can it be that the power to conquer Xaltotun lurks in that crimson bauble?"

"Aye! My head upon it!" cried Hadrathus, his face lightened with fervor, his eyes blazing, his fists clenched. "With it in our hands we can dare the powers of Xaltotun! I swear it! If we can recover it, we have an even chance of recovering your crown and driving the invaders from our portals. It is not the swords of Nemedia that Aquilonia fears, but the black arts of Xaltotun."

CONAN looked at him for a space, impressed by the priest's fire.

"It's like a quest in a nightmare," he said at last. "Yet your words echo the thought of Zelata, and all else she said was truth. I'll seek for this jewel."

"It holds the destiny of Aquilonia," said Hadrathus with conviction. "I will send men with you——"

"Nay!" exclaimed the king impatiently, not caring to be hampered by priests on his quest, however skilled in esoteric arts. "This is a task for a fighting-man. I go alone. First to Poitain, where I'll leave Albiona with Trocero. Then to Kordava, and to the sea beyond, if necessary. It may be that, even if the thief intends carrying out Tarascus's order, he'll have some difficulty finding an outbound ship at this time of the year."

"And if you find the Heart," cried Hadrathus, "I will prepare the way for your conquest. Before you return to Aquilonia I will spread the word through secret channels that you live and are returning with a magic stronger than Xaltotun's. I will have men ready to rise on your return. They *will* rise, if they have assurance that they will be protected from the black arts of Xaltotun.

"And I will aid you on your journey."

He rose and struck the gong.

"A secret tunnel leads from beneath this temple to a place outside the city wall. You shall go to Poitain on a pilgrim's boat. None will dare molest you."

"As you will." With a definite purpose in mind Conan was afire with impatience and dynamic energy. "Only let it be done swiftly."

In the meantime events were moving not slowly elsewhere in the city. A breathless messenger had burst into the palace where Valerius was amusing himself with his dancing-girls, and throwing himself on his knee, gasped out a garbled story of a bloody prison break and the escape of a lovely captive. He bore also the news that Count Thespius, to whom the execution of Albiona's sentence had been entrusted, was dying and begging for a word with Valerius before he passed.

Hurriedly cloaking himself, Valerius accompanied the man through various winding ways, and came to a chamber where Thespius lay. There was no doubt that the count was dying; bloody froth bubbled from his lips at each shuddering gasp. His severed arm had been bound to stop the flow of blood, but even without that, the gash in his side was mortal.

Alone in the chamber with the dying man, Valerius swore softly.

"By Mitra, I had believed that only one man ever lived who could strike such a blow."

"Valerius!" gasped the dying man. "He lives! Conan lives!"

"What are you saying?" ejaculated the other.

"I swear by Mitra!" gurgled Thespius, gagging on the blood that gushed to his lips. "It was he who carried off Albiona! He is not dead—no phantom come back from hell to haunt us. He is flesh and blood, and more terrible than ever. The alley behind the tower is full of dead men. Beware, Valerius—he has come back—to slay us all——"

A strong shudder shook the blood-smeared figure, and Count Thespius went limp.

Valerius frowned down at the dead man, cast a swift glance about the empty chamber, and stepping swiftly to the door, cast it open suddenly. The messenger and a group of Nemedian guardsmen stood several paces down the corridor. Valerius muttered something that might have indicated satisfaction.

"Have all gates been closed?" he demanded.

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Triple the guards at each. Let no one enter or leave the city without strictest investigation. Set men scouring the streets and searching the quarters. A very valuable prisoner has escaped, with the aid of an Aquilonian rebel. Did any of you recognize the man?"

"No, your Majesty. The old watchman had a glimpse of him, but could only say that he was a giant, clad in the black garb of the executioner, whose naked body we found in an empty cell."

"He is a dangerous man," said Valerius. "Take no chances with him. You all know the Countess Albiona. Search for her, and if you find her, kill her and her companion instantly. Do not try to take them alive."

Returning to his palace chamber, Valerius summoned before him four men of curious and alien aspect. They were tall, gaunt, of yellowish skin, and immobile countenances. They were very similar in appearance, clad alike in long black robes beneath which their sandaled feet were just visible. Their features were shadowed by their hoods. They stood before Valerius with their hands in their wide sleeves, their arms folded. Valerius looked at them without pleasure. In his far journeyings he had encountered many strange races.

"When I found you starving in the Khitan jungles," he said abruptly, "exiles from your kingdom, you swore to serve me. You have served me well enough, in your abominable way. One more service I require, and then I set you free of your oath.

"Conan, the Cimmerian, king of Aqui-

lonia, still lives, in spite of Xaltotun's sorcery—or perhaps because of it. I know not. The dark mind of that resurrected devil is too devious and subtle for a mortal man to fathom. But while Conan lives I am not safe. The people accepted me as the lesser of two evils, when they thought he was dead. Let him reappear and the throne will be rocking under my feet in revolution before I can lift my hand.

"Perhaps my allies mean to use him to replace me, if they decide I have served my purpose. I do not know. I do know that this planet is too small for two kings of Aquilonia. Seek the Cimmerian. Use your uncanny talents to ferret him out wherever he hides or runs. He has many friends in Tarantia. He had aid when he carried off Albiona. It took more than one man, even such a man as Conan, to wreak all that slaughter in the alley outside the tower. But no more. Take your staffs and strike his trail. Where that trail will lead you, I know not. But find him! And when you find him, slay him!"

The four Khitans bowed together, and still unspeaking, turned and padded noiselessly from the chamber.

Conan's weird and thrilling pursuit of the Heart of Ahriman will be told in the exciting chapters of this story in next month's WEIRD TALES. Reserve your copy at your news dealer's now.

Gray Ghosts

By CLARENCE EDWIN FLYNN

Across the fields where run our little ways
Walk the gray, sheeted ghosts of all the woes
We planted in the thoughtless yesterdays,
Ghosts that each mem'ry all too keenly knows—
Disease and retribution, progeny
Of old misdeeds we gave place in our lot—
For in Life's ever-sure economy
No thought, or word, or action is forgot.

But these are not the only ghosts that come.
There are wraiths, too, of sweet and lovely thought,
Spirits of goodness that unnumbered roam,
And those of mercy into action wrought—
The ghosts of beauty, kindliness, and grace,
That come to make the earth a brighter place.

Rendezvous

By RICHARD H. HART

The story of a ghostly ferry-boat on the Mississippi, and an engineer who would not take a drink

"TELL Marcel I said to hang on—that if he lets go I'll kick the daylights out of him! I'll be there as soon as possible."

Doctor Dumont spoke earnestly, although his words were light; they were meant to encourage the sufferer, to stiffen the will-power which alone could whip on the flagging heart until his arrival.

The doctor hung up the receiver with fingers slightly trembling and snatched his medicine case from a chair. He opened the little bag and glanced within it to make sure that his needle-set and a plentiful supply of digitalis were in their places. Then he seized his hat and rushed from the house; a moment's delay might mean victory for his ancient enemy, Death.

A plan of action—the only plan that might succeed—had popped into his head at old Etienne's first words. Etienne had said: "Mist' Favret is tak' bad, Mist' Doct'! T'ink pro*babl'* you bette' come quick!" Etienne was only an unschooled Cajun, who "cou'n' read one w'd, if he's big as box-ca' "—but he loved Marcel Favret even as Doctor Dumont loved him, and there had been an agony of fear in his voice. The doctor had decided instantly that he must catch the westbound train.

The difficulty was that the train had already left New Orleans. It was at that very moment aboard the huge iron ferry-barge being shoved across the Mississippi by a puffing tug. Doctor Dumont would have to catch it, if at all, somewhere along the opposite bank.

As ill-luck would have it, he had chosen that particular week to have his car overhauled. He could telephone for a taxi, of course, but at that evening rush-hour too many precious minutes might elapse before it arrived. The street-cars were reasonably fast and dependable, and he knew that he could afford to run no risks. He would take one.

An up-river Magazine car rumbled to a stop just as he reached the corner, and he swung thankfully aboard. The decision as to which ferry to choose had been made for him; he would cross the river at Walnut Street, and try to catch the train at Westwego.

Unconsciously, he seated himself at the extreme front of the car, as if to be that much closer to his goal. Marcel Favret was his life-long companion and dearest friend, and his patient only incidentally. Favret, suffering an unexpected relapse, needed the administration of digitalis most acutely, and only Doctor Dumont might ascertain from his symptoms the exact dosage which would save him.

There was not the slightest use in looking at his watch, but the doctor found himself doing so constantly. At each single tap of the conductor's bell, demanding a stop, he ground his teeth impatiently. Each double tap, signaling renewed progress, caused him a sigh of relief. He must—he *must*—arrive in time.

Then, only five minutes' ride from Walnut Street, Disaster showed its ugly face. The street-car's bell emitted a shower of angry *clangs;* the motorman whirled back the controller and threw on the brakes. The car ground to a stop.

Doctor Dumont was on his feet instantly, trying to beat down a great surge of despair.

There was no need to ask questions. Squarely across the track sprawled a huge tank-truck with one wheel missing and a rear axle gouged into the pavement. The street-car was effectively blocked.

ACTING without volition, the doctor leaped down from the car and started walking rapidly along the street. The outraged passengers behind him might expostulate with motorman and truck-driver until they were tired; it would do them no good. As for him, he must catch the west-bound train across the river.

He had covered nearly two blocks at a furious pace when he realized the futility of his course. He couldn't walk to Walnut Street in less than twenty minutes, and he knew that his old legs would carry him less than half the distance if he attempted to run. He must find some other way.

At the corner, he turned abruptly to the left and made his way toward the Mississippi. He would have to find a boatman to ferry him across; surely there were motorboats in plenty along the levee. A motorboat he must have, for the river was high and its rushing current would carry a skiff too far downstream in the crossing. Even now, he could hear in the still night air the whistle of the train as it left Gretna. And he must catch that train.

The thought galvanized his tired legs; he crossed Water Street at a trot. He dashed between rows of mean shanties and found himself upon a crumbling wharf. As he paused for breath, his gaze automatically wandered out across the swirling water.

Abruptly, he dashed a hand across his eyes as if to brush away an impossible sight. He had exerted himself too much, he thought. Otherwise how could be be seeing a steam ferry-boat at this point? Surely he wasn't as ignorant of New Orleans as all that!

But the sight remained, and to his ears came the confirmatory *pow-pow-pow* of the stern-wheeler. In eager amazement he heard the jangling of the pilot's bell and watched the boat glide smoothly up to the landing-stage. A moment more and he had sprung aboard.

The ferry-boat remained at the landing-stage for a minute or so, its huge paddle-wheel turning over at half speed. But no other passenger came aboard, and presently the bell jangled again and the boat swung out into the current. The paddle-wheel churned with an accelerating rhythm as the black water swirled past and the crumbling wharf fell farther and farther back into the darkness.

As suspense and excitement subsided within him, Doctor Dumont realized that the air off the river was something more than chilly. He turned up his coat-collar and stepped through the door of the engine-room in search of warmth. He recognized the possibility that this was against the rules, but the fact that there were no other passengers aboard emboldened him. The little infraction would surely be overlooked.

"Pretty cool, tonight," he remarked to the engineer.

The engineer nodded without speaking. He was a big-framed man with an immense red nose. One of his legs had been cut off just below the knee and the

missing portion had been replaced with an old-fashioned, hand-carved wooden peg. It struck the deck with a dull thump whenever he moved about.

Doctor Dumont's feeling of relief impelled him to be sociable. He drew out his emergency flask.

"Prescription liquor — twelve years old," he said. "Have a drink with me."

He was wholly unprepared for the change which came suddenly over the engineer. The fellow's eyes opened wide, his nostrils dilated, and his lips drew back from yellow teeth in a grimace of frightful rage. He took two steps forward and raised a ham-like fist. Doctor Dumont backed prudently through the door without stopping to argue; he had seen madness often enough to recognize the gleam from those wild eyes.

At that moment came a fortunate diversion. The bell overhead clattered loudly, and the engineer sullenly allowed his arm to fall, then went back to his levers. Doctor Dumont replaced his flask and hastened around to the opposite side of the deck. The crossing was at an end.

A NARROW lane bordered with tall weeds diverged from the levee, and the doctor made his way along it at a brisk walk. A hundred yards farther along, he found himself at the highway. Roaring up the pavement came a westbound bus; frantically the doctor flagged it down. Only when he was safely aboard did he realize that he had not paid his ferry-fee: in his haste he must somehow have missed the ticket office. He made a mental note to drop by sometime and pay the delinquent fare; notwithstanding the mad engineer, that had been one trip which was certainly worth the money.

He caught the train at Westwego with only seconds to spare. An hour later he was descending from it at the little town where he had practised for so many years, and where his patient awaited him. He hoped fervently that he would be in time.

Etienne met him at the station with a little automobile; it seemed to the doctor that the wheezy motor quivered with impatience.

"How's Marcel?" he demanded as he climbed in.

"Wo'se," said Etienne. "I promise *le bon Saint* can'le long's my a'm if he's get bette'—but he's wo'se." He fed more gasoline to the now roaring motor.

The little car shot forward along the dark road and began a nerve-torturing race. It turned unbanked curves on slithering tires and missed trees, fence-posts and culverts by inches. At last Etienne threw his weight on the brakes and racked it to a stop.

Both men were out of the car before it had ceased to vibrate, and Etienne led the way into the house. They found Marcel Favret unconscious, and the old Cajun went down on his knees beside the bed as the doctor fumbled with the latch of his medicine case.

"I'm just in time," the doctor muttered, fitting needle to syringe with practised speed. "Thirty minutes more—perhaps even fifteen — and Marcel would have been done for. That ferry-boat came like a dispensation."

It was a long, tense fight, and although Doctor Dumont prided himself on his freedom from superstition he more than once seemed to feel the air about him stirred by unseen wings as he labored and watched over his patient. There was an acrid taste in his mouth, and it was as if restraining hands tugged at his every muscle. Never had his enemy appeared so loth to relinquish a victim.

But skill and devotion triumphed at last, and the presence of Death was no

longer felt in the room. The patient was breathing quietly and regularly when Doctor Dumont signed to Etienne to accompany him from the bedchamber.

"He needs nothing but sleep, now," said the doctor as he closed the door behind them. "And, while he's getting it, maybe you could scrape me up a sandwich. I've eaten nothing since noon."

"You bet," Etienne said, his brown old face aglow with gratitude and admiration. "I fix you somet'ing bette'. I fix you nice om'lette an' drip you pot *café*. Good *souper* fo' good doct'."

They went out into the kitchen, and while he skilfully cracked eggs and dropped them from their shells into an earthenware bowl Etienne asked the doctor how he had managed to catch the train. Doctor Dumont settled himself comfortably at the table, then recounted his difficulties and told of how they had been overcome.

ETIENNE shredded a clove of garlic and added it to the eggs. "You say you catch de *ferie* somew'ere aroun' State Street o' Jeffe'son Av'nue?" he asked. "You *certain* it not Napole*on* o' Walnut?"

"Absolutely," the doctor assured him. "I didn't notice the name of the street, but there was a box-factory alongside the wharf where I caught the boat, and there's no such factory at either Walnut Street or Napoleon Avenue. I know that much about the city."

"Hoh — de box-fact'ry *ferie!*" exclaimed Etienne. He thoughtfully added salt, pepper, tabasco and fresh basil leaves to the mixture in the bowl. "You say de enginee' had a wooden leg?"

"Yes. And, if you ask me, the old devil's crazy as a bat."

"Hmmm. Maybe. Hmmm." Etienne whisked the omelette to a creamy froth, then turned it into a skillet under which a low fire burned. "You want I should tell you 'bout one-leg' enginee' w'ich wo'k on box-fact'ry f*erie?*"

"Go ahead," said Doctor Dumont, his eyes on the omelette.

Etienne chuckled. "A hom'lette mus' cook slow," he said.

He put a lid on the skillet and took up a small coffee-pot.

"It all happen' w'ile I living in Nyawlins," he began. "I living on Magazine Street, an' wo'king ove' at *sirop* fact'ry. I have to cross rive' two time eve'y day on box-fact'ry f*erie*. Enginee' on boat name' Leblanc. Big man wit' red head."

"The engineer on the boat tonight had red hair," put in Doctor Dumont, looking up momentarily.

"Yeah?" The old Cajun poured boiling water over the dark-roasted coffee and chicory and set the pot on the back of the stove to drip. He resumed:

"Enginee' Leblanc like w'isky too much. All time he have bottle in's pocket. Drink, drink, drink; all day long. Not get so ve'y dronk, but drink too much. One day he's not pay 'tention to pilot's bell, an' not reverse hengine quick 'nough—bump landing float ha'd. Ca*bam!* Leblanc' own brothe' is was standing on float, waiting fo' f*erie;* bump make him fall off an' drown."

"You mean that he caused his own brother to drown?" demanded the doctor.

"Yeah. He's brothe' is can swim, but bump head on piling, is knock out. Neve' come up. Dey is not find him fo' two hou's."

"Did that stop the engineer's drinking?"

"*Non!*" snorted Etienne. "Not'ing is stop him drinking. Two week afte' he's brothe' drown, he drinking some mo' an' put's foot unde' connecting-rod. *Bam!*

Mash foot *comme ça!"* He crushed one of the egg-shells in his brown fist.

"I see," said the doctor. "Gangrene—and amputation. That is how he acquired his wooden leg. What happened then?"

"One night w'ile he's in *l'hôpital* he's brothe' come to him an' tell him——"

"You mean another brother?" interrupted the doctor.

Etienne folded the omelette dexterously and transferred it to a platter. He poured out a cup of coffee and set platter and cup before the doctor before he spoke.

"*Non.* Same brothe'. Brothe' tell him if he's not stop drinking so much w'isky he's going be sorry. Going be sorry long's he's live—an' lots longe'."

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed the doctor, pausing in the act of putting his fork into the savory omelette. "You're getting all mixed up. First you say his brother was drowned, and then you say his brother came to him while he was in the hospital. I don't understand what you mean."

"Maybe you un'e'stan' mo' bette' w'en I'm finish'," Etienne returned. "W'en Leblanc get out of *l'hôpital,* wit' he's wooden leg, de f*erie* comp'ny is not want him to wo'k fo' dem some mo'. But he's tell 'em he's going get lawye'—bigges' lawye' in Nyawlins—an' sue 'em fo' big *dommage* fo' lose's leg in acci*dent.* Den f*erie* comp'ny is say he can go back to wo'k if he's not sue 'em.

"He's not drink much fo' one-two week afte' he's go back to wo'k. Den one day he's got he's bottle again, an' a big crowd of people is going ove' rive' to ball-game. Mus' be dey is hund'ed men an' women on f*erie*-boat. Leblanc is drink too much, an' not watch he's wate'-gage. Steam-gage go all way round. Den Leblanc is tu'n mo' wate' into boile'—an' she's blow up. Ca-*bam!* People dat's not kill' is drown'. Eve'y one. Leblanc too."

"Another kind of drunken driver," commented Doctor Dumont, turning from Etienne and attacking the omelette with vast appetite. "It was a good story, all right, but you got mixed up about the brother who was drowned coming to the hospital. The way you told it, it seemed as if he came to the hospital after he was drowned."

"He *did* come afte' he's drown'."

The doctor swallowed a huge draft of the black Louisiana coffee, wiped his mouth, and set down the cup with an air of satisfaction. Then he said reproachfully:

"I'm surprized at you, Etienne: telling me a story like that. What did I ever do to deserve it?"

"Do?" echoed the old Cajun, shrilly. "W'at you do? You tell me you cross de rive' tonight on box-fact'ry f*erie,* between Walnut an' Napole*on*—di'n't you? It's twenty-fi' yea's, dis ve'y mont', dat Engi-nee' Leblanc is blow up boat wit' hund'ed people on him—an' dey ain' been no steam-f*erie* on dat pa't of de rive' since!"

Return to Death

By J. WESLEY ROSENQUEST

A brief tale about the ghastly horror that befell the man in the coffin

GREAT sadness reigned in the little Transylvanian village of Rotfernberg; Herr Feldenpflanz was dead. Here and there, as one walked in the cobblestoned streets, one saw a sudden dampness in the eyes of passers-by as his name was mentioned. Everyone was talking about him, praising his virtues, lamenting his early death; and in the eyes of many a fräulein was more than a trace of tears. He was indeed well beloved by all the village.

"Poor Herr Feldenpflanz," said the tailor sadly, "a fine man, as honest as the day is long. And a learned man, too. He went to the University of Berlin for four years, and knew more than any other man in Rotfernberg. Yes indeed, a very fine man."

The tailor blew his nose with vigor, and his listeners did likewise.

"And poor Fräulein Feldenpflanz! She loved her brother very dearly. She has no one else in the world. What will she do now?"

The tailor and his listeners all shook their heads sadly.

"Even now she sits beside him. For two days she has watched him, lying like life, so calm, and prays for his soul. We all know how he drifted away from God. Those wizard's things that he did in his big, white room! Tubes full of strange vapors and lights there were, and lightning in glass balls. He always said that it was not magic—as if we had not eyes!"

"Yes," said the grocer sadly but with vigor, "as if we had not eyes!"

The village priest sat there also, a little outside the group, with sorrow written on his face; and every time one of the townsmen spoke of poor Herr Feldenpflanz's obvious traffic with Lucifer, an expression of deep pain passed over his mild and benign countenance. He was a short, stout, dark-haired man, and wore the vestments of his calling. He sat very calm and still. At last he could no longer listen without speaking his mind.

"Please, please," he said softly, "say no more of our good friend. He is now, I hope, among the blessed saints, and we must speak only well of the dead. Remember, he was a good man; perhaps he strayed without knowing that he was ensnared by the Enemy's wiles. If that be so, there is salvation for him. Let us not speak of Herr Feldenpflanz; let us not use our human judgment; let us rather pray with the Fräulein Feldenpflanz, who even now prays beside her brother's coffin."

So saying, he got up from his chair and motioned to the men gathered there in the tailor's store to follow him. They did so: the grocer, the tailor, the blacksmith, the butcher and the mayor. They climbed the steep mountain path with energy and puffing, and said nothing. The evening dew lay heavy on the long, wild grass; and from overhead fell cool drops from the leaves of the thick, ancient oaks growing on the mountainside. That cool, calm, mountain hush had descended with the twilight. It was as though a great, blue, star-sprinkled bowl had been

inverted and placed upon the earth, with the summit of the mountain touching its spangled center.

Suddenly the priest spoke to his companions.

"See, my friends, there lies the Feldenpflanz dwelling. When we enter let us conduct ourselves with fitting dignity and propriety. We must not speak to the bereaved fräulein when we enter, but gather around the coffin and pray with her. We must not disturb her."

So it was. The big house, white-painted and gabled and surrounded by gardens, lay just before them. Marring the pure, solid color of the walls and the big front door hung a significant black ribbon. The calm hush was very pronounced here. In a window near the front door there twinkled a single electric light, the only one in the town of Rotfernberg. The unschooled villagers had always been amazed by the electric fixtures and the apparatus in Feldenpflanz's home and laboratory.

All silent, the group of men reached the end of the path and tried the door. It was open, and quietly they entered, Father Josef in the lead. They passed through a long, dark hall, at the end of which was a door leading into the parlor. Light gleamed through the crack along the floor. As they approached they heard the muffled sound of low praying, mingled with sobs.

Father Josef opened the door carefully and tiptoed in, followed by the five other villagers. They crossed themselves in unison.

By a simple, black coffin of wood knelt Fräulein Feldenpflanz. Under her knees was a cushion to make possible long vigils. Her face was hidden by her long, black hair, and her head hung low over the bier. Her pale lips moved constantly. At the head of the coffin, in spite of the electric light, burned a candle; the whole coffin itself was covered with mountain blooms. The heavy, cloying odor peculiar to death did not hang in the air, however. The kneeling woman cast one vacant, tearful glance at the entering men and resumed her former attitude.

The six men came close to the coffin and gazed down upon its occupant. There lay Herr Feldenpflanz, calm and handsome and indeed very life-like, dressed in a suit made by the tailor himself. They all knelt around the bier and prayed. . . .

As he lay there, Feldenpflanz, terrified by his predicament, could think of only one thing—escape. And one word echoed and re-echoed through his brain—catalepsy, catalepsy! . . .

For hours he had been forced to listen to his sister's prayers and tears; long hour after hour he heard his death mourned, and was unable to move. He felt his own heart-beat, very slow and very gentle so that no one would be able to detect it; but it sent the blood through his numbed brain, sustaining consciousness, so that, aware of all that went on, he could know the pangs of mortal fear and the bitter-sweet of faint hope. "Help! Help!" he tried to shout, but his mind alone formed the words; his lips defied his will.

An educated man, he knew the danger of his state. A chance existed that he might regain control of his limbs before he was buried—buried alive. Consciousness was a good sign, he knew. If now he could force his body to obey his will, the final stage of recovery from this dreadful malady, he would be saved; he would return to the world he loved, to life and living, to his sister Maria.

And then a terrifying thought flashed through his head. He realized that inevitably, if not soon, the air in his coffin would be exhausted! The oxygen of the

air was slowly being used up; for although he did not move his chest, did not breathe, the air was entering and leaving his lungs by diffusion. If he could only move, a tap on the side of the box would attract attention and effect his release. Was he doomed to impotence and burial alive? The poor superstitious folk of Rotfernberg, including his sister, would probably flee in terror. It would be hopeless, then, even if he did recover the use of his limbs. They would leave him to struggle futilely in his flower-bedecked prison! Oh, why were these people not educated? Why must they confine themselves to a home and a mountainside?

Gradually he fell into a dreamy, reflective state, in which the first sharp agony of terror had dissolved away from sheer exhaustion; and only two hopes remained in his mind, like brilliant butterflies that rested for a brief moment on a withered flower. First, he must move; and second, his sister must not be afraid; she must set him free from his narrow prison. And these two hopes, bitter for their improbability and sweet for their possibility, were all for which he existed. . . .

To his ears still came the muffled voice of Maria, hoarse and weary from long use; through his eyelids the vigil-light shone. Suddenly he heard the sound of feet in the room where he was lying. He listened carefully; they were men, he calculated, about a half-dozen. Here was new hope! If he moved or made a sound, one of the men might have sense and courage enough to free him. Then his ears caught the sound of voices praying in unison. So now they too were praying for him!

Several minutes grew into an hour, and then the voices became still, including his sister's. A pang of apprehension ran through him like a red-hot sword. Were they going to leave him? But no. He heard the sound of scraping chairs and the rustle of clothing. They were sitting down. As he listened attentively, he heard a voice that was familiar, low-pitched though it was from respect for the dead, and muffled by the wooden walls that enclosed him. It was Father Josef.

"Please, Fräulein Feldenpflanz," he insisted gently, "you must go to bed now. You are very weary, and tomorrow you must rise early for your brother's funeral. Please sleep now."

There was no answer, but Feldenpflanz heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Maria was going upstairs, evidently.

"Let us hope," said Father Josef, "that our good friend has no need of our prayers. By now he is in Heaven or Hell. Be it not the latter."

The six men sat there quietly, nodding their heads.

"Or Purgatory," added the tailor, looking toward the priest for agreement.

The unmoving man in the coffin almost felt amused.

"After the burial the fräulein will no doubt destroy the unholy things in her brother's big, white room in the cellar," spoke up the blacksmith, who was a big man and who very seldom spoke. "I think," he continued, "that cellars should rightly hold only wines."

So they would like to see his laboratory destroyed! And after he was buried . . . He made a desperate, mighty attempt to move, but could not. Was it imagination or was the air really growing bad? His head began to swim, and he thought he felt his heart beat a little faster.

"The whole village of Rotfernberg will come to see the Feldenpflanz funeral," said the mayor, a tall, thin man, "and I will lead the procession. He was one of my best friends, and hence it is only

fitting that I do so. Ah, well I remember his cheerful 'Good morning' and his fine wines. He was a generous man, too, always giving alms, and he paid the highest taxes in the town. No one was more honest, either. A very fine man."

The mayor blew his nose gently, as he was in the presence of the dead. All nodded their heads in agreement except Father Josef, who was absorbed in a prayer-book. His pale hands stood out against his black cassock, and his lips moved slightly; several minutes passed before he looked up.

"Dear God, dear God," prayed Feldenpflanz over and over as he felt the true death approaching. But what was this? He felt a tremor pass over his body. His heart beat faster, and a warm flush passed over his numbed limbs! Slowly, he felt his will creep down the sleeping nerves into his extremities. Very soon now, he hoped, freedom would be his.

"Let us go now," said the priest, and a pang of terror passed through the man in the coffin. He heard the scraping of chairs and the shuffling of feet. Now was the moment! Now he must move! The beating of his heart was tumultuous; his finger-tips were tingling; his face felt hot and his head full of blood. He heard the footsteps cease; they had evidently paused over him. He heard the rustle of clothing as they rubbed against the coffin. Then the butcher spoke, in a strained tone.

"How very life-like indeed! His face flushes with blood!"

Feldenpflanz made a supreme effort of will. The darkness seemed to shake—and his eyes were open! Above him he saw six faces in a frozen tableau.

Father Josef wore a look of utmost horror and shock.

The tailor's face, long and pale and drawn, wore an expression of fear and shocked suspicion.

The butcher opened eyes and mouth wide.

The grocer crossed himself again and again, his lips moving in frantic prayer.

The blacksmith, more afraid of the supernatural than the rest, closed his eyes, gasped, and staggered back.

The mayor stared for a moment with bulging eyes, then bawled out a single word:

"Vampire!"

Then there came the sound of running and shouting, and Feldenpflanz saw the faces disappear from above his prostrate form, except that of Father Josef, who was reading a Latin invocation from his prayer-book.

THE cataleptic victim, now desperate, heard the noise of many feet running toward him, and the faces of the blacksmith and the butcher burst into view above him. There was a sound of fumbling at the side of the coffin, and then—the lid was raised. He was saved!

But what was this? The butcher had placed a knife against his left side, and the blacksmith raised a hammer high. There came to his ears the monotone of Father Josef's Latin prayer.

Feldenpflanz made inarticulate sounds.

"No, n', huh, huh, help, no!"

The hammer rose and fell. One! Two! Three!

Herr Feldenpflanz ceased to think of escape.

They

By ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON

What inexplicable horror waited on the stone slab in Dead Man's Canyon?

"WOULDN'T be stayin' in this here canyon if I was you, Mister," the old man said.

I looked at him curiously. His face was strange.

"Why not?" I asked. "Is there danger?"

The old man spat over his beard.

"Some'd say so," he said.

"But danger of what?" I pressed him. "I didn't know you had wild animals in these parts."

The old man sighed. " 'Pends on what you'd call animals," he said softly. "B'ars now, an' catamounts—why, they're all gone long ago. Clem Hawkes he shot the last deer more'n twenty years back. But nobody ain't never shot what's in this here canyon, Mister. I don't reckon nobody ever tried."

Best humor him, I mused. I'd heard that lunatics were violent if you crossed them.

"Aren't you afraid to stay here, then?" I suggested.

The old man grimaced at his long shadow on the grass. "The sun's still up, Mister," he said. " 'Long as it's light, there's no safer place in these mountains than Dead Man's Canyon. It's only after dark that They come out. Some say the sun hurts Their eyes. But I say it's Holy Writ that they only got power in the night. 'The pestilence that walketh in darkness,' Mister. That's what the Writ says. And anyhow, They don't never come out. That's why no one knows what They look like."

I lit a cigarette. The trembling of my hands annoyed me. Altitude, of course! I wasn't being taken in by this old nut with his wild story. . . .

"If you don't know what these things look like," I sought to reason with him, "how do you know they're here?"

The old man spat. "How do I know the moon's over beyond them hills?" his voice intoned. "I can't see it, can I? But I know it's there. It'll come up when the sun goes down. And They'll come out. They'll come out like they done the night Roy Timmons got lost here. We found Roy in the morning, what there was left of him. Over on that slab yonder."

I looked at the slab. It was huge and dark, with a vague suggestion of having been quarried. An altar, that was what it looked like: some sort of prehistoric stone altar, set against the background of the towering trees and the slope.

"Then there was little Sue," the old man went on. "We never dared let Sue's mother know what shape we found her in. We buried her over there under the trees. Told everybody we hadn't located her. Her mother's still believin' that the kid will come back home. Sometimes, to see her settin' there and hopin'—why, it'd jest break your heart, Mister. But she mustn't ever know."

I looked apprehensively at the sun. It was very near the horizon. Six o'clock it must be, I decided—or perhaps nearer seven. But the month was July; the days would be very long.

"Oh, They're in here all right," the

old man droned on. "Why, we've seen their footprints lots of times. The funniest footprints—like a little baby's. And Mike Collins (him that has that farm over there on the hill), he's heard Them hollerin' and carryin' on in the night, and seen lights flicker around that slab until dawn sometimes. He had a couple of big dogs, an' he sicked 'em into the canyon to see if they'd catch anything. But the dogs never come back an' Mike never found no trace of neither one." His voice trailed off.

"Gettin' along toward sundown, Mister," he began again after a pause. "Don't you reckon you'd better be headin' toward town?"

"But you?" I pressed him. I'd some vague idea of getting him to an alienist. "You can't stay here alone. You'd better come with me. We'll be safer together, you know."

The old man chuckled sadly. "Don't do no worryin' about me, Mister," he said. "I'm nearly always here. Come sundown, of course, I'll head fer the road down yonder. I got to wait until the last minute, though. Mebbe you ain't the only feller that'll come through here."

I said, "You mean you stay here every day to warn people off? You're a sort of sentinel?"

The old man nodded. "Me and old Sam Timmons changes off," he told me. "Sam was Roy Timmons' dad. At first we tried puttin' up signs. But They took 'em down. Mebbe They can't read our writin', Mister, but They musta known somehow what them signs said. So now we jest stay here ourselves. They can't do us no harm, 'cept sometimes they chuck a few rocks long about sundown——"

He broke off. A stone whanged into a tree, grazed off and fell into a bush. I looked about for the thrower, but there was nothing inside except the green wall of underbrush.

"See that, Mister?" the old man chuckled. "That means They're mad!" He raised his gun and fired both barrels in the air. Strange echoes awoke in the still air.

"That'll stop 'em," he said proudly. "They don't like guns and shootin'. It scares 'em. 'Course, they're extra bold now, 'cause it's gettin' along toward the time of the full moon. Then they'll come out to dance around the old slab, and you'll see the lights flickerin' and hear 'em holler until near dawn. . . . But, Mister, you better be gittin' out of here while there's time. Don't worry none about the old man. Some of th' boys from town alluz come to fetch me if I don't show up right on time."

I LEFT him reloading his gun. He was staring into the deepening shadows on the canyon wall, and his face was drawn and pale.

"If only I could git one good shot at Them!" I heard him mutter.

The journey was longer than I had thought it. The pathway was steep and ill-defined; the underbrush caught at my boots. I hurried along as fast as I dared. My imagination was busy with every rustle and crackle of breaking twigs. As the shadows lengthened, I became sure that something followed me unseen. . . .

I was running, and panting for breath, as I came out onto the welcome asphalt of the road that led to town. I rested there for a moment before going on, thankful for the glare of lights and the familiar sound of rushing motors. As I did so, one of the cars drew abreast of me and halted.

"See anything of an old feller with a gun?" its driver queried.

I made out three other men in the vehicle.

"Yes," I said slowly. "I did."

(Please turn to page 118)

COMING NEXT MONTH

ONE of Trehearne's arms was pinned against his side by the coils of the gigantic serpent. With the other he pounded, clawed and scratched at the armor-like scales of the monster. Every vestige of color was drained from his cheeks, and his eyes seemed about to burst from their sockets.

"Help!" he shrieked hoarsely. "Help me!"

For an instant Barry was paralyzed with astonishment. An involuntary chill coursed up his spine. A musty, sickening odor pervaded the room.

An explosive gasp came from Trehearne's mouth as the last bit of breath was squeezed from his lungs. Barry heard two or three short, sharp little reports, as of twigs snapping. He knew it was the bones of Trehearne's pinioned arm, and perhaps his ribs, breaking under the terrific pressure.

Suddenly Trehearne went limp. His jaw sagged, his head fell lolling back. His free arm dangled loose. His knees buckled.

Barry whirled on the zoologist. "You—you devil!" he exploded. "Get that thing off of Trehearne—man, do you hear me?—before I kill you!"

He leveled his automatic. From the corner of his eye he could see the jaws of the silver serpent distending—distending tremendously. He had read that such reptiles could swallow an ox easily. He shuddered. Was this fearful reptile about to——

Cloxton Vroom, the little zoologist, went white. He leaped sidewise, behind a huge vase. His colorless eyes shot past Barry and rested upon the little brown man behind the door.

"Cariaco!" he bleated. "Kill him, Cariaco!" . . .

A strange and curious tale is this weird story of a huge serpent in the New York pent-house apartment of a multi-millionare; a story about a malevolent biologist, a policeman, and a beautiful switch-board operator; a story of a thousand thrills. It will be printed complete in the February WEIRD TALES.

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NORN

By LIREVE MONET

A tale of stark horror—a powerful and thrilling story of dark forces.

February Weird Tales . . . Out February 1

They

(Continued from page 116)

"Back there in the canyon, I'll bet," the driver said. "That's where we pick him up every night, nearly. Did he warn you about—about anything, Mister?"

"He did," I admitted.

"That's old Collins' weakness," the driver nodded. "I reckon it's only natural, seein' as his granddaughter got killed there only last year. Reckon he got to puttin' two an' two together with old Timmons and they figgered out this 'They' business. They're both harmless enough, though—long as we let 'em guard that there canyon."

"Then—there's nothing dangerous in there?" I asked slowly.

"Dangerous? Why, Mister, what could there be? This here's a civilized country, ain't it?" The driver slid his car into gear. "Well, good night, sir. We'll go git the old feller now. Good night!"

IT WASN'T until some time later that I began to wonder why every man in that car should have been carrying a rifle; or why their faces were white and set, as the old man's face had been.

Then one day I read in a newspaper about a certain Samuel B. Timmons, age 87, who had been crushed by a falling boulder and unrecognizably mangled. It was an accident, of course—so the paper said. . . .

Dead Man's Canyon is still there, if anyone cares to make a further investigation. For my part . . .

Dagon *

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

I AM writing this under an appreciable mental strain, since by tonight I shall be no more. Penniless, and at the end of my supply of the drug which alone makes life endurable, I can bear the torture no longer, and shall cast myself from this garret window into the squalid street below. Do not think from my slavery to morphine that I am a weakling or a degenerate. When you have read these hastily scrawled pages you may

* From WEIRD TALES for October, 1923.

guess, though never fully realize, why it is that I must have forgetfulness or death.

It was in one of the most open and least frequented parts of the Pacific that the packet of which I was supercargo fell a victim to the German sea-raider. The great war was then at its very beginning, and the enemy's navy had not reached its later degree of ruthlessness; so that our vessel was made a legitimate prize, whilst we of her crew were treated with all the fairness and consideration due us as naval prisoners. So liberal, indeed, was the discipline of our captors, that five days after we were taken I managed to escape alone in a small boat with water and provisions for a good length of time.

When I finally found myself adrift and free, I had but little idea of my surroundings. Never a competent navigator, I could only guess vaguely by the sun and stars that I was somewhat south of the equator. Of the longitude I knew nothing, and no island or coast-line was in sight. The weather kept fair, and for uncounted days I drifted aimlessly beneath the scorching sun; waiting either for some passing ship, or to be cast on the shores of some habitable land. But neither ship nor land appeared, and I began to despair in my solitude upon the heaving vastness of unbroken blue.

The change happened whilst I slept. Its details I shall never know; for my slumber, though troubled and dream-infested, was continuous. When at last I awaked, it was to discover myself half sucked into a slimy expanse of hellish black mire which extended about me in monotonous undulations as far as I could see, and in which my boat lay grounded some distance away.

Though one might well imagine that my first sensation would be of wonder at so prodigious and unexpected a transformation of scenery, I was in reality more

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horrified than astonished; for there was in the air and in the rotting soil a sinister quality which chilled me to the very core. The region was putrid with the carcasses of decaying fish, and of other less describable things which I saw protruding from the nasty mud of the unending plain. Perhaps I should not hope to convey in mere words the unutterable hideousness that can dwell in absolute silence and barren immensity. There was nothing within hearing, and nothing in sight save a vast reach of black slime; yet the very completeness of the stillness and the homogeneity of the landscape oppressed me with a nauseating fear.

The sun was blazing down from a sky which seemed to me almost black in its cloudless cruelty; as though reflecting the inky marsh beneath my feet. As I crawled into the stranded boat I realized that only one theory could explain my position. Through some unprecedented volcanic upheaval, a portion of the ocean floor must have been thrown to the surface, exposing regions which for innumerable millions of years had lain hidden under unfathomable watery depths. So great was the extent of the new land which had risen under me, that I could not detect the faintest noise of the surging ocean, strain my ears as I might. Nor were there any sea-fowl to prey upon the dead things.

For several hours I sat thinking or brooding in the boat, which lay upon its side and afforded a slight shade as the sun moved across the heavens. As the day progressed, the ground lost some of its stickiness, and seemed likely to dry sufficiently for traveling purposes in a short time. That night I slept but little, and the next day I made for myself a pack containing food and water, preparatory to an overland journey in search of the vanished sea and possible rescue.

On the third morning I found the soil dry enough to walk upon with ease. The odor of the fish was maddening; but I was too much concerned with graver things to mind so slight an evil, and set out boldly for an unknown goal. All day I forged steadily westward, guided by a far-away hummock which rose higher than any other elevation on the rolling desert. That night I camped, and on the following day still traveled toward the hummock, though that object seemed scarcely nearer than when I had first spied it. By the fourth evening I attained the base of the mound, which turned out to be much higher than it appeared from a distance; an intervening valley setting it out in sharper relief from the general surface. Too weary to ascend, I slept in the shadow of the hill.

I do not know why my dreams were so wild that night, but before the waning and fantastically gibbous moon had risen far above the eastern plain, I was awake in a cold perspiration, determined to sleep no more. Such visions as I had experienced were too much for me to endure again. And in the glow of the moon I saw how unwise I had been to travel by day. Without the glare of the parching sun, my journey would have cost me less energy; indeed, I now felt quite able to perform the ascent which had deterred me at sunset. Picking up my pack, I started for the crest of the eminence.

I HAVE said that the unbroken monotony of the rolling plain was a source of vague horror to me; but I think my horror was greater when I gained the summit of the mound and looked down the other side into an immeasurable pit or canyon, whose black recesses the moon had not yet soared high enough to illumine. I felt myself on the edge of the world, peering over the rim into a fathomless chaos of eternal night. Through my terror ran curious reminiscences of *Paradise Lost*,

and of Satan's hideous climb through the unfashioned realms of darkness.

As the moon climbed higher in the sky, I began to see that the slopes of the valley were not quite so perpendicular as I had imagined. Ledges and outcroppings of rock afforded fairly easy footholds for a descent, whilst after a drop of a few hundred feet, the declivity became very gradual. Urged on by an impulse which I can not definitely analyze, I scrambled with difficulty down the rocks and stood on the gentler slope beneath, gazing into the Stygian deeps where no light had yet penetrated.

All at once my attention was captured by a vast and singular object on the opposite slope, which rose steeply about a hundred yards ahead of me; an object that gleamed whitely in the newly bestowed rays of the ascending moon. That it was merely a gigantic piece of stone, I soon assured myself; but I was conscious of a distinct impression that its contour and position were not altogether the work of Nature. A closer scrutiny filled me with sensations I can not express; for despite its enormous magnitude, and its location in an abyss which had yawned at the bottom of the sea since the world was young, I perceived beyond a doubt that the strange object was a well-shaped monolith whose massive bulk had known the workmanship and perhaps the worship of living and thinking creatures.

Dazed and frightened, yet not without a certain thrill of the scientist's or archeologist's delight, I examined my surroundings more closely. The moon, now near the zenith, shone weirdly and vividly above the towering steeps that hemmed in the chasm, and revealed the fact that a far-flung body of water flowed at the bottom, winding out of sight in both directions, and almost lapping my feet as I stood on the slope.

BRAIN MAGIC

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Across the chasm, the wavelets washed the base of the Cyclopean monolith, on whose surface I could now trace both inscriptions and crude sculptures. The writing was in a system of hieroglyphics unknown to me, and unlike anything I had ever seen in books; consisting for the most part of conventionalized aquatic symbols such as fishes, eels, octopi, crustaceans, mollusks, whales, and the like. Several characters obviously represented marine things which are unknown to the modern world, but whose decomposing forms I had observed on the ocean-risen plain.

It was the pictorial carving, however, that did most to hold me spellbound. Plainly visible across the intervening water on account of their enormous size were an array of bas-reliefs whose subjects would have excited the envy of a Doré. I think that these things were supposed to depict men—at least, a certain sort of men; though the creatures were shown disporting like fishes in the waters of some marine grotto, or paying homage at some monolithic shrine which appeared to be under the waves as well. Of their faces and forms I dare not speak in detail; for the mere remembrance makes me grow faint. Grotesque beyond the imagination of a Poe or a Bulwer, they were damnably human in general outline despite webbed hands and feet, shockingly wide and flabby lips, glassy, bulging eyes, and other features less pleasant to recall. Curiously enough, they seemed to have been chiseled badly out of proportion with their scenic background; for one of the creatures was shown in the act of killing a whale represented as but little larger than himself.

I remarked, as I say, their grotesqueness and strange size; but in a moment decided that they were merely the imaginary gods of some primitive fishing or seafaring tribe; some tribe whose last descendant had perished eras before the first ancestor of the Piltdown or Neandertal man was born. Awestruck at this unexpected glimpse into a past beyond the conception of the most daring anthropologist, I stood musing, whilst the moon cast queer reflections on the silent channel before me.

Then suddenly I saw it. With only a slight churning to mark its rise to the surface, the thing slid into view above the dark waters. Vast, Polyphemus-like, and loathsome, it darted like a stupendous monster of nightmares to the monolith, about which it flung its gigantic scaly arms, the while it bowed its hideous head and gave vent to certain measured sounds. I think I went mad then.

Of my frantic ascent of the slope and cliff, and of my delirious journey back to the stranded boat, I remember little. I believe I sang a great deal, and laughed oddly when I was unable to sing. I have indistinct recollections of a great storm sometime after I reached the boat; at any rate, I know that I heard peals of thunder and other tones which Nature utters only in wild and terrible moods.

When I came out of the shadows I was in a San Francisco hospital, brought thither by the captain of the American ship which had picked up my boat in mid-ocean. In my delirium I had said much, but found that my words had been given scant attention. Of any land upheaval in the Pacific, my rescuers knew nothing; nor did I deem it necessary to insist upon a thing which I knew they could not believe. Once I sought out a celebrated ethnologist, and amused him with peculiar questions regarding the ancient Philistine legend of Dagon, the Fish-God; but, soon perceiving that he was hopelessly conventional, I did not press my inquiries.

It is at night, especially when the moon

is gibbous and waning, that I see the thing. I tried morphine, but the drug has given only transient surcease, and has drawn me into its clutches as a hopeless slave. So now I am going to end matters, having written a full account for the information or the contemptuous amusement of my fellow-men. Often I ask myself if it could not all have been a pure fantasm—a mere freak of fever as I lay sun-stricken and raving in the open boat after my escape from the German man-of-war.

This I ask myself, but ever does there come before me a hideously vivid vision in reply. I can not think of the deep sea without shuddering at the nameless things that may at this very moment be crawling and floundering on its slimy bed, worshipping their ancient stone idols and carving their own detestable likenesses on submarine obelisks of water-soaked granite. I dream of a day when they may rise above the billows to drag down in their reeking talons the remnants of puny, war-exhausted mankind—of a day when the land shall sink, and the dark ocean floor shall ascend amidst universal pandemonium.

The end is near. I hear a noise at the door, as of some immense slippery body lumbering against it. It shall not find me. God, *that hand!* The window! The window!

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THIS magazine is the pioneer periodical devoted entirely to stories of the weird and supernatural. It has had many imitators, some of which have fallen among thorns and perished. But for more than twelve years WEIRD TALES, like Old Man River, has kept rolling along. Mixing the metaphors a little more, let us add that WEIRD TALES is still flying the flag of literary merit that has kept this periodical in the vanguard of weird magazines, far out in front of all imitators. The stories that we print are well told. They hold the readers' interest. We have printed a number of blood-and-thunder stories during the twelve years of our existence, and will doubtless print others; but it is the pride of WEIRD TALES that virtually all its stories are of high literary excellence. We will continue to print the kind of stories that have given this magazine its high fame.

Enthusiasm Plus

Miss Gertrude Hemken, of Chicago, writes: "I have finished reading the October issue just as the November issue was out, so I'll try my durndest to give you my comments on both. Ooooooooooo (extending into a guttural growl) says I, as I rub my hands in fiendish glee over Doctor Satan. He's just about the archest of arch-fiends I've ever encountered. And then, just like a woman, I wonder if Ascott Keane will suddenly awaken to realize the great love he bears for his bewful secret'ry—just my femininity coming to the fore—yearning for romance—may sound like dribble, but that's a woman fer ye. Jes' as I set to wondering if Conan were still with us—up he pops again. Nice boy he is, of that burly he-man type that I so admire. I lose myself entirely in his adventures. Three cheers for the author! And there was Jules de Grandin last month—*Sacré!* how I love that little man with his quaint phrases and jumping-jack ways. Only don't let him know that I called him 'little.' From what I gather, he resents that. Northwest Smith was a treat again, too. Quite a hero, and so shudderingly did Moore tell of those smoky depths in the gal's eyes—or were they eyes? Gruesome tales of such eyes give me the willies, no less—for downright everyday life, I'll take eyes that are deep, deep blue, or even brown. I appreciate them all the more after reading such tales. Somehow I can't help comparing Clark Ashton Smith with Edgar Allan Poe. The nature of their tales is so widely different, yet the utmost detail at which both writers arrive is so similar. And to keep that detail from being boresome, the selection of words, so seldom encountered, is truly food for thought. I'm still wondering what kind of a dictionary Mr. Smith has—the words he uses are so out-of-the-ordinary. I can't find them in any of my reference books. All the more credit to you, Mr. Smith. And now that I've covered the two issues, there isn't any more criticism—good, bad or indifferent, until next month."

Keep WT Unique

C. L. MacDougall, of Salem, New York, writes: "This is my first letter to the Eyrie, although I have been reading your 'unique magazine' for about two years. I became acquainted with WEIRD TALES by accident a couple of years ago. At that time I was working as a night-watchman on a construction job in a little town a few miles from Salem. I had just finished reading a popular western publication and was wondering what I was going to do with myself all night (nights are rather long sometimes watching on a job of this kind) when a young lad, who happened along, stopped in and wanted

to exchange a magazine he had for the one I had just finished. I was more than willing to oblige him and needless to say my night turned out to be a highly enjoyable one, thanks to that magazine. It was a darn good issue of WEIRD TALES. I have been reading your magazine ever since. I've just finished reading the November issue, and boy! it sure was a keen number. I especially like the Doctor Satan series, and *The Consuming Flame* was up to the standard. Conan was good in Howard's *Shadows in Zamboula*, as was the reprint. For real chillers I would recommend Paul F. Stern's *The Way Home* as well as *The Hand of Wrath* by Price. The filler stories were good reading also, which made the issue a top-notch number. The only story I didn't especially care for was Leslie F. Stone's *When the Flame-Flowers Blossomed*. As for the covers: they're swell; I like 'em nude or otherwise as long as they are by Brundage. The best one for 1935 was the October issue. I think WEIRD TALES is swell; because it's different. Let's keep it unique."

More Vampires and Werewolves

Orin S. McFarland, of Tampa, Florida, writes: "I've read your magazine since 1930 and think there is nothing like it on the news stands. I only buy two magazines and yours is one of the two. I noticed you have plenty of arguments about the nudes on your covers. They are all right, but why can't you have a few weird pictures sometime? This month's cover is excellently painted and much better than most of your covers. . . . Let's have more vampire stories and also werewolf stories. We haven't had any of this type for a long time. And by the way, what has happened to Hugh Davidson? He writes excellent stories of this type. We haven't had any of his stories in a long time. Yours for more vampire and werewolf tales." [An excellent weird story by Hugh Davidson will be published soon. It is entitled *The House of the Evil Eye*.—THE EDITOR.]

Better and Better

A reader who signs himself O. B. W. writes from New York City: "I have just finished another issue of 'the Unique Magazine.' There is nothing to say but that WEIRD TALES is getting better and better. *The Six Sleepers* held best by far in my opinion. Please have Mr. Hamilton write a

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sequel to this astounding story. *Hollywood Horror* of course has a high average. Instead of the cover that was printed I would rather have seen a picture of a girl with a skull for a head looking in a mirror or killing herself with the shears. Take Mary Ashley's advice and have a few nude men as you do women. Why not give the male sex a chance for once? I have been buying many back copies lately and am glad to see how the magazine has improved. The best part of the magazine is the Eyrie."

Six Favorite Authors

David Mahoney, of San Francisco, writes: "Just a few words on the magazine and the authors themselves. My favorite authors are six: Lovecraft, Howard, Quinn, Moore, Hamilton and Ward. I've only been reading your book for the last two and a half years, but I think Lovecraft is your best, greatest, etc., author. . . . Now for the best three stories in the November issue. They are, in order: 1. *Shadows in Zamboula;* 2. *The Consuming Flame;* 3. *The Hand of Wrath.*"

A Letter from Jack Darrow

Jack Darrow, of Chicago, writes to the Eyrie: "The story I liked best in the November issue of WEIRD TALES is *The Way Home* by Paul Frederick Stern. A truly weird story. The latter seems to be scarce these days. Let's have more stories dwelling on the unknown, stories without natural explanations. E. Hoffmann Price I can always enjoy; hence *The Hand of Wrath* went over all right with me. I also enjoyed *When the Flame-Flowers Blossomed* and *Mr. Berbeck Had a Dream.* The Conan stories live up to the title—WEIRD TALES. Why not try Napoli on the cover? I'm glad to hear that Jack Williamson is returning. Let's hope he writes more prolifically now."

Best Stories of 1935

Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C., writes: "The November WT is an excellent issue and I thoroughly enjoyed every story in it. *Shadows in Zamboula* by Howard is a masterpiece and easily takes first place. His descriptions of vigorous action are superb. I like especially well his colorful description of the battle royal between Conan and the massive structure of bone and muscle called Baal-pteor. As much as I dislike purely scientific and detective stories I must admit that *The Consuming Flame* by Ernst held my attention to the very last word and gets my selection for second place. *The Way Home* by Stern is a very interesting tale and I award third place to it. It seems to me that he couldn't refrain from obtaining a glimpse of himself, when he passed by so many shop windows with the street lights shining on them. My selections of the twelve best stories in WT during 1935, judging by their uniqueness and originality, are as follows: *The Dark Eidolon, Rulers of the Future, Lord of the Lamia, Jewels of Gwahlur, Julhi, Out of the Eons, The Man Who Could Not Go Home, The Bronze Casket, Jirel Meets Magic, The Mystery of the Last Guest, Shadows in Zamboula,* and—choosing this one because the other Kaldar stories are so excellent—*The Great Brain of Kaldar.*"

The Way Home

Robert Tuft, of White Plains, New York, writes: "My sincere thanks for printing Paul Frederick Stern's unheralded masterpiece, *The Way Home.* It is the best story WEIRD TALES has presented in many ages. It was an unusual and very well written tale, worth waiting a long time for. Unless I miss my guess, it will cause quite a stir among your readers."

What Is a Weird Tale?

Ernest H. Ormsbee, of Albany, New York, writes: "In the interest of keeping WEIRD TALES weird, I am for the second time since this series started, writing to tell you that Paul Ernst's superb story, *Hollywood Horror,* is strictly *not* weird and has no place in our unique magazine. Again I will state this reader's definition to you: a tale, to be weird, must consist of things that have no possible solution in our prosaic everyday scheme of things. These stories of Paul Ernst contain not a single truly supernatural feature, not a thing that hasn't an answer in the realm of science. They are superb stories—but not for WT. To go on with my (I hope) constructive criticism for the month of October. Edmond Hamilton is not known as a particular writer of weird tales. His field is the interplanetary, and in this field he excels, but the interplanetary is not in itself weird. Some of his tales have weird features. I would classify *The Six Sleepers* as pseudo-weird. An answer to all the questions he builds up might be found in pathological and mechan-

ical science. *The Cold Gray God* of C. L. Moore is honestly weird. There is no answer in either abstract or scientific religion or abstract or scientific science for the question he portrays. As usual, Seabury Quinn gives us a superlative detective story in *The Dead-Alive Mummy*. This tale encompasses two medical views as well as, in a scientific manner, explaining something that has no explanation and is therefore completely in the field of the weird. John Flanders in *The Mystery of the Last Guest* has given us another version of the gray rider and the perennial Hamlet. Our spirits do not die, but we cannot very well define the reason for their lingering and so they are true weird tale material. . . . *In a Graveyard* by Eando Binder is the story of an unexisting character and is therefore weird. You can't put a finger on a vampire. It is a gripping little story in the bargain. *The Amulet of Hell* by Robert Leonard Russell has everything necessary for a weird tale, although it is an old story done in a new way. Coming at last to the reprint, *The Lost Club* by Arthur Machen. I will leave this one open. It may be weird. This writer in his stories stresses the difference, or the shade of difference, between weird and eery. Considering him by the stories of his with which I am familiar, I would not rate him as a really weird-story writer in the same way I would rate Lovecraft or Quinn. His stories are *eery* stories. You classed *The Lost Club* as an eery story in your introduction. It is awkward drawing a line between weird and eery. In this case I will do it this way: a medically trained criminologist *might* have accounted for *The Lost Club* in a perfectly natural manner, but didn't. Had the tale been truly weird it would have been 'beyond the pale' and no imagination could have worked out a natural solution to it."

Weird Detective Stories

Kenneth Garner, of Sioux City, Iowa, writes to the Eyrie: "Have been reading your magazine for a period of nearly eight years. Until the present time, I fail to recall a single issue wherein the stories of the Doctor Satan type were featured. There are certain magazines on the stands today that feature the Doctor Satan type of literature. One must concede, however, that as far as reading matter is concerned, the Doctor Satan type is by far superior to the other type. The point is,

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that when I want to read weird detective stories I'll buy them, but when I sit down to read your magazine I don't expect to find weird detective stories included therein. I predict that the majority of the readers will endorse that statement. I think that the story, *The Way Home,* by Paul Frederick Stern, was the eeriest story I have had the pleasure of reading for some time. In my opinion, for sheer weirdness it surpassed *Shadows in Zamboula.* Yours for weirder WEIRD TALES."

Hamilton and Moore

Alvin V. Pershing writes from Bowling Green, Kentucky: "*The Six Sleepers* was one of the BEST stories ever published by WEIRD TALES. By all means let us have a sequel to this story. *The Cold Gray God* was an improvement on Moore's stories, if improvement is a possibility with his near-perfect artistry. The October issue is the best this year, although my favorite author, Clark Ashton Smith, was not among the authors."

No Like?

Sidney Slomich, of Dorchester, Massachusetts, writes: "The November issue is one of the worst you have put out. The cover is a disgrace. Why can't you have a truly *weird* design on it? *Shadows of Zamboula* is not weird. *The Consuming Flame* is terrible. That, too, is not a weird tale. *The Hand of Wrath* is fair. The best story in the issue is *When the Flame-Flowers Blossomed.* This is an ingenious little tale. It is closely followed by *The Carnival of Death* and *The Way Home.* The rest of the stories are terrible, especially the Poe reprint."

Concise Comments

Margaret Van Hausen, of Binghamton, New York, writes: "I like the covers. But I do think detective stories are a mistake in this magazine. *The Way Home* by Paul Frederick Stern is really weird."

Edward Helenik, of New York City, writes: "*The Way Home* was perfect. Why not have a space-ship story, with a picture on the front cover?"

Kenneth Garner, of Sioux City, Iowa, writes: "*Shadows in Zamboula* is very good. *The Way Home* elicits pity—it is a fine type of story. *The Carnival of Death* is a well-written mystery."

Your Favorite Story

Readers, what is your favorite story in this issue? Write us a letter, or fill out the coupon at the bottom of this page, and send it to the Eyrie, in care of this magazine. Your favorite story in the November issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was *The Way Home* by Paul Frederick Stern. This was closely pressed for first choice by *Shadows in Zamboula,* Robert E. Howard's thrill-tale about Conan the barbarian adventurer.

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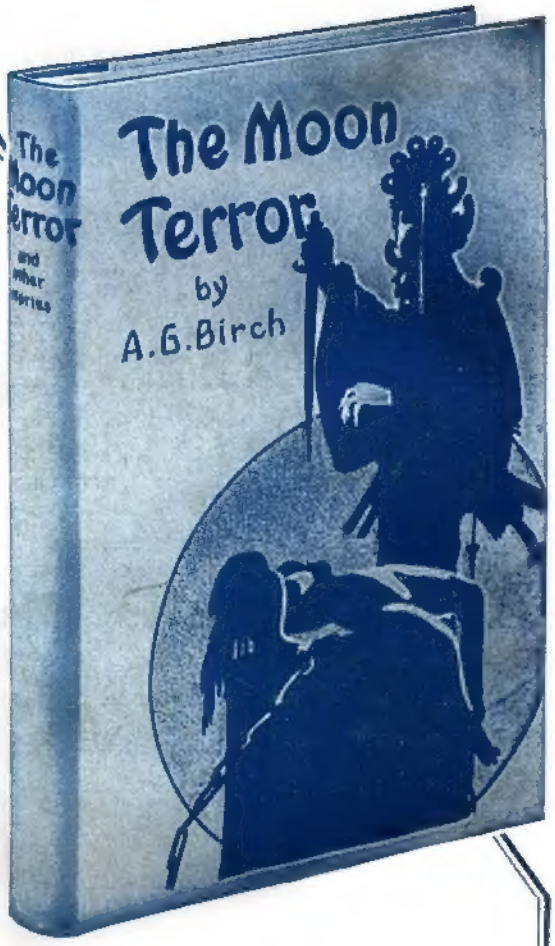

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